The Bestselling Author of THE CITY OF JOY

Dominique Lapierre

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE SOVIET UNION

The fantastic motorcar rally undertaken by two young French couples on the forbidden roads of the Soviet Union

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ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE SOVIET UNION

FULL CIRCLE books
by Dominique Lapierre

The City of Joy

A Thousand Suns

It Was Five Past Midnight in Bhopal

Is New York Burning ?

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The fantastic motorcar rally undertaken by two young French couples on the forbidden roads of the Soviet Union

Dominique Lapierre

Translated from the French by
Kathryn Spink

Photographs by
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and Dominique Lapierre

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NOTE TO THE READER

This book does not pretend to paint an exhaustive portrait of the Soviet Union in the days following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's crimes. Nor does it claim to offer conclusive revelations about life behind the Iron Curtain at that time. It seeks only to entertain the reader with the prodigious journey that Jean-Pierre Pedrazzini and I, along with our wives and a young Russian journalist couple, were able to make by car on Soviet roads miraculously exposed to our curiosity by Khrushchev himself.

No political agenda guided our steps or encounters. We never asked ourselves the question whether or not we liked Russia and its regime. These pages are an entirely objective account of the life of those Soviet citizens who spontaneously welcomed and opened their doors to us along the thirteen thousand kilometres route that belonged neither to heaven nor to hell, but to the history of humanity[1].

Dominique Lapierre
Ramatuelle, France

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[1] *Some episodes contained in this account are referred to in* En liberté sur les routes d'URSS *(Grasset, 1957) and* A Thousand Suns *(Full Circle, 1999)*

To

Jean-Pierre Pedrazzini,

Larry Collins

and Slava Petoukhov,

in memory of the happy days of our youth.

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I would like to express all my gratitude to my long time dear friends and publishers Shekhar and Poonam Malhotra, and their daughter Priyanka, for the enthusiastic fervour they expressed in preparing and publishing this first time edition in English of "Once Upon A Time In The Soviet Union".

I would like to associate in this homage of gratitude my many Indian friends who have been supporting with such faith my humanitarian action in Calcutta and Bengal.

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Dominique Lapierre

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1

NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV: 'YOUR WIVES WILL DIVORCE YOU IN A FORTNIGHT.'

The fog was so thick we could no longer make out the tip of the Jaguar's bonnet. The report we were taking back to *Paris Match* that winter's night in early 1956 was very unpretentious. It recorded the journey from his Périgueux village to the cemetery of a Resistance hero who, in the evening of his life, had swapped his general's uniform for a country clergyman's cassock. In our profession we were constantly being reminded that there are no such things as insignificant or significant stories, only stories and journalists who are more or less inspired. I took advantage of the sea of cotton wool enclosing our cockpit to allow my imagination free rein. I have always adored tales of great motoring adventures: the Croisière Jaune, the Alaska-Tierra del Fuego rally, the Paris-Timbuktu-Cape Town expedition... Among the books that inspired my adolescence was an account of a

fantastic rally just before the Second World War driven by two leading French scouts by the name of Guy de Larigaudie and Roger Drapier. At that time no car had made it overland from Paris to Saigon, into Indochina, across the Ganges and Brahmaputra deltas and the mountains of Burma. Paris, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Damascus, the deserts of Syria and Iraq, the high plateaux of Afghanistan, the great highway across India...I ended up knowing the exploits recounted by Larigaudie in his book *La route aux aventures* off by heart. Every one of them was a continuing source of inspiration.

'What if we were to suggest to *Match* that we spend our next holiday going across China in a motorcar? With our wives and a whole supply of little Eiffel towers and perfume samples! What a series of articles that would make! The Chinese as no one in the West has ever seen them before!'

The guy to whom I was submitting the fruits of my thought processes narrowly avoided swerving his shiny new XK140 in the cotton wool blanket. His name was Jean-Pierre Pedrazzini. He was two years older than me. He was twenty-seven. With the profile of a Greek god, his tall build, untidy shock of hair and the trench coat from which he was never parted, he looked like Mermoz, the famous French aviator who conquered the South Atlantic. Ever since *Match* had published photos of the fierce aggression to which he had

been subjected on a Caribbean beach by the bodyguards to Britain's Princess Margaret, he had enjoyed a certain aura among reporters in the international magazine press. In fact, Pedra – as he was called at the magazine – owed his popularity to courage and professional valour. His photos taken at great risk in most of the globe's hotspots were among those that had contributed to *Match*'s image as a great current affairs magazine. When Pedrazzini's legendary silhouette appeared on a 'job', the competition mobilised. If Pedra was there, it meant it was worth it.

From the moment I arrived at *Match* I had known I wanted to be teamed up with this outstanding photographer. It was very pretentious of me: all the house reporters wanted the same. A report is primarily the product of team work. Good alchemy between a reporter and his photographer always bodes well.

'Why not ask *Match* to send us to the moon?' Jean-Pierre guffawed, surprised at my foolishness. 'What makes you think for one second that the Chinese will open their doors to four capitalist tourists in a car? For one thing there aren't even any roads in China. We'd have to use a jeep, and then...'

Far from curbing my enthusiasm, my friend's reaction spurred me on.

'Perhaps we could pick up a former American command-car at a Hong Kong breakers. With that kind of vehicle you don't need roads.'

'Do you know anyone who's actually tried it?' enquired Jean-Pierre, concerned.

'Yes. In the Croisière Jaune. They went from Paris to Peking, dismantling their cars whenever there were mountains that couldn't be crossed or rivers without bridges.'

Jean-Pierre burst out laughing.

'That was twenty-five years ago! Mao's taken over China since then!'

'So what if we tried it in Russia? Maybe that would be easier...'

Jean-Pierre frowned.

'Remember the good dentist from Chicago who tried to get into the USSR via Finland with his car full of medicines?' he replied. 'He was immediately picked up by the Russians. They sent his old banger back to Helsinki on a freight truck.'

Carried away by my dream, I didn't hear my friend's objections.

'Just imagine it, Jean-Pierre, we could take Napoleon's route to Moscow, cross the Ukraine, sleep in a kolkhoz[1], stay with a railwayman in Minsk, a shop assistant from some big store in Stalingrad, a Tiflis doctor, pitch tent in the Caucasus, catch sturgeon with the Volga fishermen, sunbathe in Yalta... imagine your photos and my articles introducing people quite objectively to the life of the Russians we meet, with them welcoming us spontaneously with wide open doors, across thousands of kilometres belonging neither to hell nor heaven but to the history of humanity.'

'And whatever makes you think the Russians are going to let us see everything they're so desperate to hide behind an iron curtain?' Jean-Pierre let drop with apparent regret.

In the face of this irrefutable logic I tried a diversion.

'Do you think our wives would be willing to share the risks and discomforts of an expedition across China or Russia?'

It was a pertinent question because the women's magazine *Marie-Claire* might be prepared to be associated with such a project.

By way of a honeymoon I had just dragged my wife off round the world without any money. I had discovered how

much the presence of a female companion with an appetite for discovery could enrich an experience. Jean-Pierre for his part had just got married.

'At the moment my experience of travelling with Annie is limited to a trip to Saint-Tropez,' he admitted, 'albeit with two lovely flat tyres on the Nationale 7. Hats off to my wife for her skill with a jack!'

We burst out laughing. I could already imagine us broken down in the mountains of Yunnan or on the Rostov-on-Don route.

'And what about their temperament? You don't think they're likely to throw a wobbly at the slightest problem?'

'How do I know? A sudden attack of jealousy, painful periods...with them you can never tell.'

My friend's clarity of insight amazed me. And all the more so because even while he spoke he was handling the steering wheel with rare dexterity.

A sudden break in the fog revealed a signboard. 'PARIS Porte d'Orléans', I read. Would I ever be fortunate enough to see the names Peking or Brest-Litovsk in Chinese characters or Cyrillic script?

To convince the Russians and the Chinese of the virtue of our proposals, I hurriedly put together a dossier which I rushed to the two embassies in Paris. The pimply Chinaman who eventually received me behind the railings of Peking's representation very nearly choked to death when he learned what we wanted. Yet I had wrapped the presentation up with every possible guarantee. I had even expressed our desire to invite a young Chinese journalist couple to accompany us throughout our itinerary, and afterwards come to France to do a similar report on the French. I very quickly realised that my request did not correspond with any pattern in the programmed mind of this humble bureaucrat from the land of Mao. The generous era of the Croisière Jaune had left no trace on subsequent mentalities.

My reception at the Soviet Embassy in the rue de Grenelle was scarcely more encouraging. For an instant I was afraid of being taken for a provocateur. 'Drive across Russia in a car and meet the Russian people? Impossible, comrade journalist. Individual travel by foreigners is not permitted in the Soviet Union.' My brief experience as a professional journalist had taught me never to take 'Niet' to be definitive. I emphasised our proposal to invite a young

Soviet journalist couple to travel with us then come to France. But this generous suggestion seemed rather to aggravate our case. I left the rue de Grenelle with a heavy heart.

All the experts I consulted warned me: neither the Russians nor the Chinese would want us to see the inadequacy and poor condition of their road network, the rarity of petrol pumps and garages, the non-existence of any hotel infrastructure and the poverty of their countryside. Above all, neither of them would want to encourage contact between their citizens and foreigners. The risk of contamination would be too great. In short our precious dream got off to such a bad start that we made plans to take our next summer holiday in more conventional locations. Jean-Pierre reserved a sailing boat in Cannes to go and explore the coast of Corsica with his young wife. As for me, I booked two quarter horses for Aliette and me to go and live with the cowboys on a ranch in the American West.

It was then that agency copy originating from Moscow suddenly reawakened our hopes. Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Soviet Union's Communist Party had just given a violent indictment speech in camera to the 20th Party Congress, denouncing Stalin's crimes. It was made up of forty-three acid-dripping pages, accusing the former father of the people of having had thousands of officers massacred

for no reason, of being responsible for the military catastrophe of 1941, and of having really lapsed at the end of his life into bloodthirsty mania. The affair caused an uproar. The Sovietologists we consulted were categorical: this speech probably heralded a spectacular change in relations between Moscow and the Iron Curtain countries and beyond that, between East and West. It was the birth of de-Stalinization.

I rushed round to the rue de Grenelle to try and see whether there was any chance of our benefiting from this upheaval. The response was still 'Niet'. To appease my disappointment, I chose the finest notepaper headed *Paris Match* and decided to address myself directly to Nikita Khrushchev. I knew I was being naïve in the extreme but you never knew. The man who had denounced Stalin's crimes might just take pity on the fact that four young French people had such a desire to be free to get to know his country. I decided to send my letter quite simply to the Kremlin. Moscow's postmen would no doubt know the exact address of tovarich[2] Nikita.

'Did you think to include a stamp for the reply?' Jean-Pierre asked anxiously. He was full of admiration for my perseverance.

Frequently taking us away from Paris, the hectic news

developments of that spring of 1956 helped us to bear the wait. Every time we came back, I would run round and lay siege to the Russian and Chinese embassies to a point where I was resented by all their diplomatic staff. That was when a brief news item appearing on *Match*'s teleprinter made me jump out of my skin. The former president of the French Republic, Vincent Auriol was going to Moscow with his wife, at the invitation of Marshal Bulganin, chairman of the USSR's Council of Ministers. The visit would be the occasion of an informal meeting with the main Soviet leaders and a journey across several of the country's regions. Exultant, I called Jean-Pierre.

'You may have to cancel your sailing boat for Corsica! Vincent Auriol is going to Moscow. *Match* has agreed to send us to cover the visit. We shall meet Khrushchev, Bulganin, Molotov and the whole shooting match!'

Jean-Pierre remained speechless. Two days later we were received by the former president. The burden of the years had done nothing to detract from the vivacity of this popular little man who was as jovial as he was warm. He appeared to be delighted to learn that we were going with him to the USSR. I took the opportunity to confide our intentions to him. His reaction was quite the opposite of all those we had so far encountered.

'The Russians will jump at it!' he enthused. 'It's a unique opportunity for them to make their country known and show they no longer have anything to hide!'

Our spirits were all the more lifted for the fact that he quite spontaneously offered to intercede on behalf of our project with the high authorities he was going to meet.

Marvellous Russian hospitality! From the splendours dripping with gold and crystal of the Kremlin palaces to the abyssal depths of the workers' metro, from the truck factories of Ural to the still visible ruins of Stalingrad, from the muddy kolkhozes of the Ukraine to the verdant vineyards of Georgia, the Russians flew the small French delegation of which we were fortunate enough to be part, in a special twin-engine plane. On a trolley in the central aisle a bowl of caviar occupied a place of honour with a silver ladle, porcelain dishes and a bottle of vodka on ice. Discovering that the figurative expression of consuming 'caviar by the ladle' could be a reality, Jean-Pierre and I did more than reasonable justice to this profusion. We might never succeed in exploring the USSR at ground level but at least we would have crossed it mid-air, gorging ourselves to the point of nausea on this sublime manna of small, silvery granules.

Nothing escaped the discerning eye of the old man we were accompanying. He was interested in everything: salaries, leave, social benefits. Of one kolkhoz chairman he enquired:

'How much milk do your cows yield?'

'Twelve litres.'

The French president reflected:

'Cross them with some Dutch breeds. Feed them on beet. You'll double your production.'

And he concluded with a laugh:

'If I were to stay here for six months I'd end up an honoured kolkhozian!'

All the regime's barons came to clink glasses beneath the crystal chandeliers in the Kremlin's throne room with the former French president Vincent Auriol and his wife Michèle who was wearing a superb shapka[3] bought that afternoon in the fashion department at Gum, Moscow's answer to the Galeries Lafayette. By some miracle we could scarcely believe, we were also part of the festivities. I pinched my thigh to make sure it was really I who was sitting in a gilded Louise

XVI chair opposite Marshal Bulganin, chairman of the Soviet Union's Council of Ministers. A few months earlier, I had caught a glimpse of this little man with greying hair and the air of a benign grandfather in the flesh during the Geneva peace conference. He had been posing next to Eisenhower, Anthony Eden and Edgar Faure on the terrace of the United Nations Building for the historic photo of that first summit of the Cold War. A wall of Swiss soldiers and security agents had kept journalists at a distance. And now there I was less than two metres away from the Soviet Head of State with a glass of champagne in my hand. The French president, picking up my emotion, called out to the Marshal:

'Comrade Bulganin,' he exclaimed, 'may I present Dominique Lapierre, one of our best French journalists. And this is Jean-Pierre Pedrazzini, one of our great photographers.'

The Russian's face lit up with a paternal smile. He seized our hands and shook them at length. I was on cloud nine. But the best was yet to come.

Vincent Auriol carried us along in his wake. With his uncommon eye he had spotted the star of the evening, standing in front of the mountains of fine cold meats and smoked trout on the buffet. I could not believe my eyes. The small man with the shiny pate who had just shaken world communism by toppling Stalin from his pedestal, was also

at the reception. With an air of authority he pressed a glass of champagne into Auriol's hand, then while he was about it, into Jean-Pierre's and mine, and toasted Franco-Soviet friendship warmly. How were we to believe we were actually touching glasses with Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, head of an empire that extended over a quarter of the planet, leader of a thermonuclear power with which only Eisenhower's America could pretend to compete? Yes, we, Jean-Pierre Pedrazzini and Dominique Lapierre, young twenty-seven and twenty-five-year-old French reporters, were amazed to find ourselves clinking champagne glasses with Khrushchev, the former Donetz shepherd whom Stalin had sent into the hell of Stalingrad to make an end of Hitler's armies. We were drinking with the man who had obliterated Beria to hoist himself up to the pinnacle of power. I wanted to believe too that I was drinking with one who, in the aftermath of his historic speech at the 20th Party Congress, would like to give his country a more open face. And why shouldn't our motorcar expedition be one of the first demonstrations of this change?

'*Dadna*[4]*!*' Nikita Khrushchev proclaimed joyously as he emptied his glass in one go. The French president and other guests immediately followed his example.

A second toast, this time proposed by Marshal Bulganin provided Vincent Auriol with the opportunity he seemed to have been looking for. Catching the arm of his charming blonde interpreter, to our complete surprise he launched a moving appeal in our favour. Since his arrival in Moscow we had heard him on many occasions proclaiming the merits of our proposed assignment. As if the matter of French Second World War prisoners still detained in Russia, Armenians from Marseille held against their will and many another bones of Franco-Russian contention he had intended broaching with his hosts had become less urgent than convincing the Russians they should allow us to drive en famille through their country in a motor car.

'Do you know, dear comrades, how these two intrepid young men would like to spend their next holiday?' he exclaimed indicating Jean-Pierre and me in turn. 'They actually want to drive through your country with their wives to put together a portrait of today's USSR.'

There was an icy silence. Suddenly the faces had frozen. Khrushchev mopped his brow vigorously with his handkerchief. Bulganin smoothed his goatee nervously. Molotov polished his eyeglasses. Gromyko coughed discreetly. Marshal Vorochilov cleared his throat. Nicola Regov, Secretary of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, rubbed

at the nape of his neck. Anastas Mikoyan, the all-powerful minister for trade, fiddled with the hairs of his slim moustache. It was extraordinary! The government of the USSR stunned all at once by the foolish ambitions of two young Western journalists. Their discomfort lasted for several seconds. Then suddenly Khrushchev guffawed. In mocking tones the First Secretary exclaimed:

'That's a very bad idea, comrade president! Our roads are so dreadful your protégés' wives would be wanting a divorce in a fortnight!'

The festivities could be resumed. In one fell swoop the joke had relaxed the tension. The door to the Iron Curtain would not be opened. With a jocular remark met with much laughter Nikita Khrushchev had buried our dreams of adventure on his country's roads.

Two days later from the boarding steps of the special plane with red stars that was to take him back to Paris, the ex French president signalled us a warm goodbye. Against the din of the engines I could make out a few words.

'Don't give up!' The old man yelled at the top of his voice over the noise of the plane. 'There's still a slight chance.'

A slight chance! Even if there had ever really been one *Paris Match* undoubtedly blew it a few days after our return to Paris by publishing the sensational scoop we had involuntarily brought back from our Soviet escapade with Auriol. A stupefied world had just learned that on 8 March several demonstrations had taken place in Tiflis and other towns in Georgia, the state where Stalin had been born, in condemnation of the indictment of the 20th Party Congress against the former little father of the people. By an extraordinary coincidence the Auriols had happened to be in Tiflis that morning. We had photographed them admiring the apparently peaceful city from up on a belvedere clinging to the first slopes of the Caucasus. Our plane to Moscow had left the town just before nine. On the road to the airport we had met tanks and trucks loaded with soldiers, never imagining of course that they were going to crush the Georgians' rebellion against the new master of the USSR. One hour later Tiflis had been cut off from the rest of the universe. Retrospectively our pictures assumed the value of an historic record. In its issue for Saturday 24 March 1956, *Paris Match* paid grandiose tribute to this fortuitous 'achievement' by running a headline right across a double page: 'In Stalinist Tiflis on the morning of the troubles,

report by our special envoys with President Auriol, Dominique Lapierre and Jean-Pierre Pedrazzini.'

I could well imagine the negative reaction this media fuss over an affair the Soviets had gone to great lengths to conceal would provoke in Moscow. I knew that this time we could wave good-bye to our dream of driving freely across the USSR. Summer was imminent and with it the long holiday. It was a case of 'Corsica and the cowboys of the American West, here we come!'

[1] *A form of collective farm*
[2] *Comrade*
[3] *Fur hat*
[4] *Bottoms up!*

2

OUR FIRST RUSSIAN NIGHT WITH THE COMMUNIST BISON SAVED BY THE GREAT OCTOBER REVOLUTION

It was one morning at the end of June, a few days before we were due to go on holiday that the miracle happened. The 'slight chance' predicted from the top of the boarding steps of his plane by President Auriol had taken four months to mature in the arcana of Muscovite power. It took the form of the sudden arrival at *Paris Match* of a long telegram in French, which I cannot resist the pleasure of transcribing in full.

'MESSIEURS LAPIERRE AND PEDRAZZINI. THIS IS TO CONVEY OUR AGREEMENT TO YOUR PROPOSAL TO DRIVE ACROSS THE SOVIET UNION. YOU WILL ENTER SOVIET TERRITORY VIA THE FRONTIER TOWN OF BREST-LITOVSK. YOUR ITINERARY WILL INCLUDE THE CITIES OF MINSK,

MOSCOW, KHARKOV, KIEV, YALTA, SUKHUMI, SOTCHI, TIFLIS, KRASNODAR, ROSTOV, STALINGRAD AND KAZAN. HAPPY TO DISCUSS DETAILS OF THIS ITINERARY WITH YOU ON YOUR ARRIVAL MOSCOW. REQUEST YOU LET US KNOW THE DATE OF YOUR ENTRY BREST-LITOVSK SO WE CAN INFORM OUR REPRESENTATIVE. VISAS AWAIT YOU SOVIET EMBASSY IN PARIS.'

I was so flabbergasted that my eyes thought they made out Khrushchev's signature at the bottom of the text. It was a figment of my imagination but the author of the telegram was almost as powerful a figure as the Soviet number one. Vladimir Ilytchev was the much-dreaded director of Intourist, the organization controlling all foreign tourism within the USSR.

We launched ourselves at a map to pinpoint every section of the over thirteen thousand kilometre tour being suggested to us. The Soviets were in fact opening up the whole of western Russia, from Poland to Ural and Belarus to the Caucasus to our car bonnet.

The belated arrival of this astounding message launched us into a frenzied rush. If we were to avoid the risk of being surprised, like Napoleon and Hitler, by the early arrival of the Russian winter, we would have to leave as soon as possible.

But first we must find the most reliable and sturdiest steed capable of transporting all four of us and our gear over such a long and adventurous journey. Looking for a vehicle specially designed for heavy loads or difficult terrains was out of the question. We wanted a mass-produced car such as Mr Average might own: this journey was not a rally or the Croisière Jaune.

I fell for an estate car on display in the Simca window at the very top end of the Champs-Elysées. A vessel like that would make a liar of Khrushchev: our wives would never ask for a divorce. It was the very latest model, a kind of beautiful American dame called 'Marly', comfortable, spacious and propelled by an eight cylinder engine in V formation. Its pretty straw and black colours would definitely make the crowds behind the Iron Curtain 'flip'. I asked at once for a meeting with the sales director who was enthusiastic about our project. Simca would lend us the regal 'Marly' in its Champs-Elysées display window. We had 'PARIS MATCH' and 'MARIE-CLAIRE' painted on the front wings, 'ROAMING THE ROADS OF THE USSR' on its sides, and in Russian on the rear wings 'FRENCH JOURNALISTS'. In large red letters on the tailgate we had inscribed 'FRANCE'.

Aliette, my wife, who was a fashion consultant at the

Bazar de l'Hotel de Ville, the famous Parisian department store on the right bank, managed to borrow a tent and all the camping equipment we needed for our escapades in the Caucasus. Annie, Jean-Pierre's wife, filled a trunk with little Eiffel Towers, miniature Arcs de Triomphe, scarves, maps of Paris and samples of *Vent Vert* and *Jolie Madame* perfume, a gift from Balmain that would delight the Russians. Relatives and friends submerged us in a variety of provisions for us to distribute all along the route. Europe 1 supplied us with a tape recorder; Paillard, a 16mm camera; Kodak kilometres of film; and Bailly the chemist, enough medicines to treat the entire population of Russia's illnesses...On 14 July, as the French army paraded to band music down the Champs-Elysées, we were all set to leave on our great adventure.

It was then that two mysterious gentlemen waylaid us outside the entrance to the magazine's office. They absolutely must speak to us before we left. After some hesitation we suggested going for a coffee in the Belle Ferronière, the HQ for *Match* reporters just across the way. They gave us to understand that they would prefer somewhere more discreet. We offered them the intimacy of the nearby American Legion's bar just under the *Paris Match* building.

No sooner had we settled than the older of the two visitors took out of his jacket pocket a small card with

tricolour stripes on it on which I saw the five initials SDECE, the abbreviation for the French secret service. The man then expressed his great satisfaction at being able to meet us in this way just prior to our departure because his superiors wanted to give us an important mission.

'The Soviets have just secretly detonated into the atmosphere several thermonuclear charges, the exact composition of which is of the utmost interest to our experts,' he explained to us in an undertone, making sure that no surrounding ears were likely to eavesdrop on his confidence. 'We know that you are going to cover several thousand kilometres in very different regions. Is that correct?'

Despite the strong suspicion our two interlocutors inspired, we nodded our assent.

'That being the case,' went on the extra who had not as yet said anything, 'we'd like to ask you a favour.'

Our astonishment made them smile.

'Oh nothing really compromising,' the first interlocutor was quick to reassure us. 'Could you pick leaves from plants and trees for us at several points along your way? We think analysis of the vegetation would provide information about the nature and power of the Soviet explosions.'

We were left open-mouthed.

'If you were dealing with British citizens, it would go without saying that your request would be complied with,' I said eventually. 'Don't they say that every Englishman is a potential spy for Her Majesty's Secret Service? Alas, I'm afraid that isn't altogether the case in France, at least not in our journalist profession.'

I turned to Jean-Pierre for his approval and concluded:

'As far as we are concerned, we won't do anything to abuse the hospitality of those who are going to receive us.'

We got up and I indicated politely to our visitors that the conversation was over.

As I watched the two men walk away, a thought crossed my mind: 'What if they were provocateurs sent by the KGB?'

The Marly was a dream. Powerful, silent, comfortable. We were able to pile all our luggage, equipment and two spare wheels into it. Our wives were in seventh heaven on the back seat and to crown it all we were even been able to bring along a bottle of pastis. We did not know it then (it was

hardly something we were likely to imagine), but a few weeks later that bottle was to put a smile on the face of a gulag escapee with a Marseille accent.

A gentle run in through the pretty, prosperous French, Swiss and German countryside, an uneventful crossing of Berlin divided into four, and suddenly there was the shock. A shock in the form of a smell. A smell that struck us in the first toilets we stopped at in Poland. A heady smell of disinfectant that never left us throughout our thirteen thousand kilometre trip. It was through the nostrils that we had our first experience of the communist world.

Warsaw: 450 kilometres

The road lined with chestnut trees was straight and good but dangerous because of the carts that trundled along it and the animals that strayed across it. With the exception of a few trucks there were no motor vehicles. In many of the villages ruins had not been rebuilt. From time to time a sign or notice in German recalled the Nazi occupation. Peasants watched us go past with amazement while barefoot kids applauded and waved vigorously, to which we responded with a shower of toffees and sweets. There we were at Poznan, disrupted less than a month previously by the violent strikes

that had turned this small industrial city into a prime symbol of Polish workers' discontent with Communist oppression. Armoured cars patrolled the squares and avenues but the city seemed calm. For us Poznan heralded above all the nightmare that was to become an obsession throughout our journey: finding petrol. Gone was all trace of the reassuring Shell, Esso or BP signs we had seen prior to reaching West Berlin. Appreciating our predicament, a policeman directed us to a sort of garage where we eventually spotted the magic totem of a solitary pump. But the garage was closed. Outside the entrance to the Orbis Hotel, a hotel with the sorry look of a council built apartment block, a French engineer, taken aback by the sudden appearance of our car, offered to guide us to the only place in the city that dispensed petrol.

At midnight, having narrowly escaped crashing into some twenty peasant carts without lights, we arrived in Warsaw. The wide avenues of the Polish capital were bathed in a pallid light. But at the Hotel Bristol, the local luxury hotel frequented by the Polish nomenklatura and foreigners, the Saturday night festivities were in full swing. We deposited our baggage under ceiling lights with pompommed shades in two vast rooms and went down to the restaurant which was full despite the lateness of the hour. An orchestra with musicians dressed up in sky blue uniforms was playing

American tunes from the 1930s for couples to dance to. Most of the men were without ties and had manifestly forgotten to shave. They floated about in suits that were too big for them and their outrageously made-up wives in floral dresses that were too tight for them and heavy heeled court shoes had the rococo look of characters in a film by Fellini. This discovery of the canons of Communist elegance was of enormous interest to Aliette and Annie. Three months later when we passed through Warsaw again on our way back from the USSR, the Polish capital would appear the height of chic and luxury. For the moment we had only just arrived from Paris: it would take time for our eyes to adjust to a world where charm, beauty, elegance and finesse expressed themselves according to different criteria. Our wives were over the moon: this journey promised to be an ethnographic expedition for them too.

No luck. We had arrived too late for dinner: the restaurant kitchen had just closed. The language of Molière and our half-starved appearance were to save us, however. A bespectacled waiter, realising we were French, came over to our table.

'I'll try and get you something,' he informed us in impeccable French. 'A little soup, some ham, what's left of the salad.'

Suddenly his voice became barely audible. He glanced swiftly round him.

'I was born near Valenciennes,' he confided. 'My father was a miner. I lived in France until I was thirty-five. Then, in 1947, I returned to Poland...a stupid mistake...yes, a big mistake...'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'But then I get by. In France I had set up a small transport company. Here I'm a waiter in a restaurant...I can eat. I have a cubby-hole to sleep in...tips...I work for two days and on the third I go and see my wife and kids twenty kilometres from here. What else can I do with a salary of seven hundred zlotys! A cheap pair of shoes costs five hundred!'

Suddenly he looked worried then begged us in a whisper:

'Whatever you do, don't tell anyone I've spoken to you.'

Thank you, dear unknown waiter in the Hotel Bristol in Warsaw, for this exhortation to secrecy. It alerted us to the fact that from then on we were in a world where hostile ears could be lurking anywhere.

The trumpeting of a brass band under our windows wrested us early from our first communist night. That summer Sunday Poland was celebrating its national festival.

To the accompaniment of the music an impressive stream of red flags and banners with effigies of all the Iron Curtain leaders with Khrushchev at the head flowed past. Then, in a throb of engines, came an interminable column of tanks, armoured cars, motor-drawn guns, mobile rocket launchers and troop carriers. Successive waves of fighter planes whistled past, skimming the roof tops. The display went on for hours in front of the close ranks of local people massed on the pavements. Yet at no point did any applause, shouting or cheering issue from this somewhat indifferent crowd. On the VIP stand presided the two Soviet marshals who had liberated Poland from Nazi tyranny, Joukov and Rokossovski, their chests covered with decorations. They were there as the bearers of a fond salute from their big Soviet brother to its fragile Polish ally.

We had difficulty in extricating the Marly from this gigantic military traffic jam to drive to the French Ambassador's residence where we had been invited for lunch. It was an opportunity to re-immerse ourselves in the charming and refined atmosphere of a little piece of France before taking the great plunge eastwards. Even the Marly did not escape the generous attentions of our hosts. The ambassador had her tank filled up with a petrol nectar of the kind she would not enjoy again until our return to the West. The diplomat then adorned our radio aerial with a

small French pennant which suddenly gave our proud vehicle a very official air. Again, how could we ever have imagined that in a few weeks time that small piece of material would dispatch one of our admirers to a gulag hell?

Two hundred and fifty kilometres to the Soviet-Polish border. A carpet of grass covered the paving stones. Incontrovertible proof that no vehicle ever made use of the stretch of roadway leading to the bridge that spanned the river separating the two countries. A watchtower and the Polish flag against the grey sky, half a dozen soldiers, submachine guns with camembert shaped magazines on their backs, a barbed wire barrier across the bridge. The eruption of our straw and black estate car provoked quite a reaction. The soldiers rushed over to prod the bodywork, touch the wheels, and caress the bumpers. An NCO signalled to us to wait; he went to inform the head of the Soviet frontier post of our arrival. We were all four so affected that we did not dare even light a cigarette. The grey houses, the watchtower, the pole with its red flag on the far side of the bridge...and there was Brest-Litovsk, one of the very first towns conquered by the invading Nazis in Operation Barbarossa on a similar

summer's evening fifteen years previously. Now it was one of the rare frontier crossings into the Soviet bloc.

Night fell and with it came all kinds of black thoughts. What if the Russians had changed their minds? I invoked all the saints dear to me and invited my travelling companions to do the same. Our wives displayed exemplary calm.

'Anyone for gin?' inquired Jean-Pierre to distract us from our impatience.

There was no time to agree. A headlight had just pierced the darkness from the other bank. The point of light moved onto the bridge and advanced in our direction. Two Soviet soldiers aboard a motorbike and sidecar came to a halt in front of the Polish post. A brief dialogue took place and the guards opened up the barbed wire barrier. The motorbike and sidecar did a half circle and the officer driving it signalled to us to follow.

Aliette and Annie's joy was obvious as we broke into laughter at a rousing: 'The four of us are actually off to Russia!' from Jean-Pierre. I drove behind the motorbike with its team in peaked caps with all the caution of a Sioux Indian. Suddenly the Marly's headlamps caught a whole group of uniforms in the middle of the bridge, in the centre of which stood a tall, fair-haired civilian who motioned to us to stop. The man immediately came over to our car.

'Welcome to the Soviet Union!' he exclaimed with brio, accompanying his excellent French with a broad smile. 'My name is Stanislav Ivanovich Petoukhov – you can call me Slava – and I am a reporter for *Komsomolskïa Pravda*, the Young Communists' daily. You suggested a Soviet journalist accompany you on your journey. Well, here I am!'

The Russian uttered these last words with such pleasure that all four of us leapt out of the Marly to shake him by the hand. In his capacity as senior member of the expedition Jean-Pierre took it upon himself to introduce us one after another.

'Don't worry, my wife Vera will be joining us in Moscow,' explained the Russian and turned to the group of officials behind him. 'This is the MVD officer in command of the frontier post,' he announced indicating an individual with a severe face dressed in a green uniform jacket and baggy breeches.

The policeman at once stepped forward and, coming to impeccable attention, gave us a long salute. Perfect in his role of master of ceremonies, Slava next called upon a character in braid with an ample white cap.

'This is the tovarich commander of the customs post of Brest-Litovsk', he explained.

Like his MVD colleague, he too gave us a most respectful salute.

Jean-Pierre and I received all these signs of deference with relief. If by some misfortune one of the Soviet customs officers had actually taken it upon himself to check the contents of our car, we could well have spent most of our holiday in Brest-Litovsk.

Slava continued his round of introductions until a weasel-faced little man came and barked in our faces: 'Passports!' Gone were the bowing and scraping and the red carpet. Now we were getting down to business.

Two jeeps full of soldiers escorted us to the station buffet-restaurant where the customs and police formalities were completed in a matter of minutes. Never in the memory of those in charge of the border had any foreigner entered the USSR with such ease. Our passports and the Marly's customs documents were soon adorned with an impressive array of stamps which we would display with great pride on our return. The frontier station was a sumptuous building richly decorated with a candy pink ceiling sporting an allegory to the glory of the revolution. Bent over their floor cloths, old women with scarves on their heads relentlessly scrubbed the floor, exuding in their wake that distinctive aroma of disinfectant that we had smelt for the first time in Poland.

Clearly pleased and flattered by his role of guide, Slava summoned the man in charge of the buffet and ordered a spread, the extravagance of which risked prematurely depleting the modest budget agreed by *Match*.

'My friends, we must really celebrate the great day on which you arrived in the Soviet Union!' he explained joyously.

He spoke his country's name with touching intensity. Throughout our journey those words 'the Soviet Union' would issue from his mouth like some magic formula. In all events, that evening we were regaled with caviar, vodka, white and red wine, and a whole range of meats, vegetables and salads. Anyone would have thought the Soviets wanted to introduce their territory to us as a place of fine dining. Yet in the only travel guide we had been able to unearth in Paris before our departure there was no star for the Brest-Litovsk entry. It should be said that the guide was a Baedecker dated ...1912. Slava snatched it from our hands and leafed through it with respect.

'Extraordinary!' he enthused. 'Quite extraordinary... Saint Petersburg...Nizhny Novgorod... cities that no longer exist.'

He carried on:

'That is to say which no longer exist under those names...'

I looked at this tall, nice looking fellow with his chubby cheeks, and fine, blonde disorderly curls. He chain smoked *papirossi*, the long Russian cigarettes with their interminable cardboard tips. He was likeable, very likeable even. On the bridge he had confided to us that he had spent three years in Bucharest, sent by his paper. It was there that he had learned his remarkable French which he spoke without even rolling his *r*s. Was he a Party member? Definitely, to have been authorised to leave Soviet territory even for a brother country. Was he also a KGB agent? Probably, to have been entrusted with this mission as guide to four foreign travellers. We would soon find out.

Several tables were occupied by travellers chatting loudly. It might have been at one of them, or ours, that on 3 March 1918 Trotsky and his delegation had sat down with representatives of Kaiser Wilhelm I, who had doubtless themselves arrived via the bridge we had used, to sign the famous armistice that saved the Bolshevik revolution by withdrawing Russia from the First World War. Yes, it was in this very station where we were eating caviar and roaring with laughter with a son of the October Revolution that the agreement changing the course of history had been reached.

I took advantage of a pause between courses to reveal our intentions to our guide.

'No one in the West knows how Russians live. It would be wonderful to be able to recount the history and life of four or five families chosen at random where we stop off.'

'That would mean going into their homes and sharing their private lives for two or three days,' specified Jean-Pierre who was already composing his photo essay in his head.

'Going into their homes!' Slava choked. 'I don't know if that will be possible. Soviet citizens are not used to letting foreigners into their homes. One would no doubt have to ask for authorisation.'

'Authorisation?' marvelled Jean-Pierre.

'Yes, from those in charge of local security.'

The sudden confusion of our interlocutor was very understandable. With the support of Aliette and Annie who used their charm with all kinds of expressions of appeasement, I assured him of the integrity of our intentions.

'My dear Slava, we're not spies,' I said, thinking of our visit from the SDECE inspectors before we left.

The Russian crushed my shoulder with a friendly but forceful pat.

'I know, I know, Dominique, but in our country we are not given to frequenting strangers' homes.'

'All the same,' I said, 'we hope your presence with us will always be an aid rather than an obstacle.'

Slava came up with a disarming smile.

'You can count on it, my friends!'

'As proof of our good will, we would like to invite you to come to France afterwards with your wife to do everything that we have been able to do in your country.'

All at once the Russian began to melt. Through the smoke from his papirossa we could see his eyes glistening with tears.

'Ah! How wonderful that would be!' he sighed.

Alas, I am afraid that our sincere promise did not count for much. How could the Soviet authorities ever be expected to allow a couple to leave for a capitalist country where they might be tempted to choose freedom?

It was in two small rooms, the occupants of which, much to our shame, had been precipitously evicted, that we spent our first Russian night. The iron beds without mattresses, the communal washbasins in the middle of the landing, the

shadows loitering in the corridors, the pestilential smell of the toilets where scraps of newspaper used as toilet paper were not thrown down the bowl but religiously deposited in a bin, and the rattle of trains constantly manoeuvring beneath our windows brought a few grimaces to our wives' hitherto beaming faces. But we put on a brave face to say good night to our friend Slava who asked to borrow our Baedecker to enjoy a few chapters before going to sleep.

'Great news, friends! I've spoken to several people in charge and they've suggested I put a magnificent proposal to you!'

Our friend Slava greeted us for our first Russian breakfast with so much excitement that we could already see all the doors to Soviet interiors opening to satisfy our curiosity. Or perhaps Nikita Khrushchev was passing through the region and had asked to meet us. Our appetite was insatiable. We wanted to see Russians, laugh with Russians, sing with Russians. Quickly, Slava, show us your compatriots.

Well, it wasn't Russians at all that our dear Slava wanted to show us on that first morning. What he wanted to show us was bison.

'Bison?' spluttered Aliette, giving voice to our little group's general surprise.

'Yes, yes, yes, friends, you are going to start your journey across the Soviet Union by making the acquaintance of Europe's last bison.'

Slava brandished the 1912 Baedecker he had borrowed from us on the previous evening. 'Do you know what I learned last night, reading this book? That the tsars came here to hunt bison. This was the most renowned place in the country. The authorities I consulted told me that so many bison were massacred because of the blood-lust of those tyrants that the species was on the point of extinction. Fortunately the great October Revolution came along to save the last survivors *in extremis*. My friends, how lucky you are! Less than thirty kilometres from here you are going to be able to meet the last bison in Europe!'

After two hours of dreadful lanes on which we narrowly escaped wrecking the Marly at every instant, there we were in a vast clearing surrounded on three sides by a triple row of fencing. In the long grass beyond the enclosure appeared

suddenly the impressive dark, humpbacked silhouettes of the famous creatures that had so excited the imagination of our Russian friend since his reading of our ancient Baedecker. One of them came over and seized the branch of a bush Aliette held out for it, in its muzzle. Their short, pointed, dagger-like horns, disagreeable expression and monstrous bodies did nothing to reassure us. It was at this point that the guardian of this prehistoric forest arrived. Under the peak of his cloth cap, Vassili Ivanovich, thirty-five, harboured blue eyes full of mischief. He lived alone with his wild beasts each of which he called by name. For this man of the woods, who had never seen foreigners before, our visit was an event. He led us into his little house with white-washed walls, furnished with a simple table, four stools, a wooden board that served as a bed, and a pendulum clock which marked the hours with a shrillish chime.

Slava was jubilant. This unexpected discovery of the least accessible parts of his country was a real cause for celebration. What was more, as soon as evening began to fall upon the forest Vassili Ivanovich invited us to spend the night in the barn where he stored fodder for his bison in winter. We eagerly accepted and all set about getting the necessary provisions out from where they were stowed in the Marly to prepare an improvised dinner for our host. True to his Italian

origins, Jean-Pierre prepared a masterly dish of pasta while Vassili made up a wild mushroom ratatouille on his fire. Round the rough table of that tiny isba lost in the forest, we shared like true friends. When fatigue came upon them Slava and Vassili started to hum old nostalgic ballads that sang of the eternal soul of this immense, harsh land... Suddenly we found ourselves in a page of Chekhov, touched by that marvellous Russian sensibility the profundity of which no regime will ever change.

Midnight was sounding on Vassili's clock when we went to unroll our sleeping bags on the bisons' food supply. As I lay waiting for sleep, I listened to the forest trembling and the thousands of creatures crying out in the darkness.

When we woke Vassili informed us he had sat up all night to guard us against a pack of wolves that had come dangerously close to the barn where we were sleeping. As a souvenir of our visit he gave us two splendid elk antlers. Then with his big blue eyes full of emotion, he asked us to pass on his greetings to all the forest wardens in France.

3

FOUR 'MARTIANS' ON BOARD A TWO-COLOURED SPACE SHIP

Minsk: three hundred and fifty kilometres. The appearance of our two-coloured 'ship' on the straight ribbon of asphalt traversing the flat countryside as far as the eye could see, gave us a succession of frights. In their surprise at the sight of our unusual vehicle, the drivers of trucks full of kolkhozniks would suddenly swerve dangerously, nearly driving us into the ditch. Fortunately, in village after village, the colossal fist held heavenwards of a stone Lenin or Stalin, or sometimes both together, seemed to want to protect our Marly from fatal collision. The entrance to every agglomeration was decorated with a portrait gallery of people to be honoured. Slava proudly revealed that every month the local authorities came and put the pictures of deserving workers on display beneath the traditional sickle encircling a globe. Further on we drove between two rows of huge placards hammering home in white letters on a red

background the slogans with which the regime daily nourished the people. 'PEASANTS, LET US MARCH TO COMMUNISM', 'PEASANTS, LEARN TO MASTER THE SCIENCES', 'PEASANTS, ALWAYS SALUTE THE WORLD WITH YOUR OUTSTANDING WORK', they exhorted one after another.

Now and then there would appear by the side of the road white stone sculptures of a worker marching off to work, a man and a woman with heads held high and a look of triumph, a soldier brandishing a flag, a mother presenting her child as an offering, a sportsman throwing the discus, a little boy sounding a bugle. In the course of our thirteen thousand kilometre route, we would come to know the infinite gamut of the regime's iconography and in the end paid no attention to it. But for the time being it came as a surprise.

'Is this abundance of propaganda really effective?' asked Aliette naïvely.

'Of course, dear Aliette,' Slava lost no time in answering. 'It makes our people constantly aware of the aims and achievements of our great revolution. Furthermore,' he explained, 'it is the workers and peasants themselves who put up those placards and sculptures on the side of the road with the idea of putting pressure on our leaders.'

The message of one of the placards in particular tickled my curiosity. 'THE SOVIET PEOPLE ARE STRUGGLING FOR PEACE WITH ALL THEIR MIGHT' it claimed. Three summers earlier I had covered the Korean War as a journalist so I asked for an explanation:

'If the Soviet people claim they are struggling with all their might for peace, why did their leaders put pressure on North Korea to invade South Korea?'

Slava looked taken aback:

'What are you saying there, Dominique?' he protested strongly. 'You know very well it was South Korea that invaded North Korea!'

The discreet elbow Aliette dug into my ribs stopped dead my impulse to prove Slava wrong. My wife was right. We had not come there to destroy certitudes and replace them with our truths.

A few kilometres before Minsk a motorist throwing all caution to the wind, opened the door of his vehicle, stuck his head out in order to see better and overtook us, horn blaring. He stopped a little further on and watched us go past, looking rooted to the spot. Ten minutes later there he was, overtaking us again, simply for the pleasure of having another look at our Marly. The game amused Slava enormously.

'There are still so few cars in our country,' he commented. 'So just imagine the effect of a car painted yellow and black with inscriptions in red on its wings!'

Minsk! Successively annexed by a Lithuanian conqueror, burnt by the Swedes and occupied by Napoleon, since 1919 the city had been the capital of the Soviet republic of Belarus. Severely damaged during the Nazi invasion, it had only just risen from its ruins to present us with wide avenues virtually devoid of cars, over ornate streetlamps, a colossal statue of Lenin and monuments overloaded with colonnades and sculptures typical of Stalinist architecture.

Russians at last! In their tens, in their hundreds. The huge station square suddenly looked like the exit to a stadium. We were swamped from all sides by a sea of faces flattening themselves against windows we had swiftly wound up. We were being scrutinized like exotic fish in the bottom of an aquarium. There was not a smile, not a gesture, only unutterable astonishment. To avoid asphyxiating we were obliged to move on. But a little further on, the sea of faces reformed itself around our fragile cockpit. One old man, who had stepped straight out of a Dostoyevsky novel, resolved to speak to us. In the absence of Slava who had gone off to buy cigarettes, our ability to communicate with him was obviously limited. In the end I realised it was the number of

cylinders and the make of the car that interested him. Emboldened by this contact, a plump babushka, her head swathed in a floral scarf, asked us whether the car belonged to us and how much it had cost. It was then that a spotty adolescent noticed on the wings the inscription in Russian: 'FRENCH JOURNALISTS'. Seeing this, an expression of happiness passed across his face.

'*The months, the days, the tides of the seas, eyes that weep, pass beneath the blue sky. The grass must grow and children must die, I know that, oh God...*' he recited in French. 'Do you know that poem by Victor Hugo?' he asked in almost perfect French.

We were amazed. He poked his head into the car.

'Do you have any French newspapers you could give me?' he whispered. 'Magazines from Paris?'

We dug out an old copy of *Paris Match*, wrapped it in a paper bag and passed it to him discreetly with one of our little Eiffel Towers. We would never know the identity of that lad so enamoured of Victor Hugo in Minsk station square.

For Russians who had lived so long in a state of isolation from the rest of the world the appearance of our two-toned car with four 'Martians' on board was clearly a scarcely

believable spectacle. We were to encounter the same curiosity, the same wonder throughout our trip. Every time we stopped we were assailed, surrounded, submerged. Curious people slid under the car to examine the suspension. We were constantly being asked to open the bonnet so they could look at the engine. Heads popped in through the window to admire the interior fittings. In Tiflis in Georgia mounted police charged to repel the enthusiastic crowd. In Kharkov children pinched the windscreen-wiper blades as trophies; in Kiev a taxi driver begged us to take him for a ride. We used up tens of litres of water just for the pleasure of having jets of washer liquid squirt onto the windscreen, a facility unknown to the rare Soviet cars. In Yalta, an elderly lady even begged us to let down a tyre so that she could 'breathe the air of Paris'. Day by day Radio-Moscow broadcast the progress of our expedition, which meant that everywhere we went we were feverishly awaited.

He was one of two million Soviet railwaymen, the aristocrats among workers in a land where the railways constituted the principle means of communication. Our idea of opening our portrait gallery with a report on the life of a railway worker's family aroused Slava's interest. We pressed him to

take us to the engine depot at Minsk station. The arrival of the Marly gave us a surfeit of choice. In seconds a circle of black faces and greasy hands formed around us. We immediately picked out a man in a navy blue cap decorated with a small hammer crossed with a sliding foot. His big blue eyes and attractive, slightly weary smile appealed particularly to our wives. His name was Victor Anufrievich Sicheiko. He was forty-eight years old, married and the father of three children. After driving trains for twenty-four years, now he was in charge of the local engine repair works.

The sudden intrusion of four foreigners in a workplace unused to receiving visitors naturally created some confusion. Would the security people turn up and kick us out? Would we be arrested? A frisson of anxiety ran over all four of us. But Slava had taken the matter in hand. He justified our incursion with authority, explained what we wanted and got forty-eight hours' leave from his superior for Victor, who had agreed to become the protagonist of our article. Without giving him time even to wash his hands we got him into our car. Direction: Number 75 of the second building in Kirova Road, one of three blocks of railwaymen's flats in Minsk, where he lived with his wife Valentina, their two daughters Aïda and Ludmilla, and their son Vova, aged twelve. This virtual kidnapping protected us from all official manipulation: it was we who had chosen our subject.

We were to find Victor's lodgings just as he had left them that morning. They consisted of only two small rooms, a miniscule shower room with no windows but nonetheless with hot and cold water for two hours a day, and the semblance of a kitchen straddling the landing. In all thirty-two square metres. For one who was privileged on three counts in Soviet society (as a railwayman, foreman and Party member) it was obviously modest. But then Khrushchev had just revealed that sixty per cent of Russians lived in a single room. The inventory was swiftly drawn up. In the parents' bedroom which also served as dining and living room, Aliette and Annie noted an iron bed with copper knobs and two beautiful embroidered pillows, a pine wardrobe with a mirror that reflected a curiously deformed image, a round table and four chairs, an exuberant green plant perched on a stool, an upright piano and a sewing machine. There was no refrigerator or washing machine. Nor was there a television, a purchase which would have represented two months of Victor and his wife Valentina's wages for just three hours of programmes broadcast daily from Tele-Minsk's brand new aerial. The inventory did have one surprise in store for us, however: a telephone. I noted down the number. On our return to Paris we would call Minsk 97 46 15. Sadly, the terrible events which threatened world peace a few months later prevented us from getting through.

A collection of framed photographs lined the walls of the room and gave it distinctive warmth. They all evoked memories of 'the great patriotic war against Fascism'. One picture showed a radiant Victor sporting several rows of medals on his sergeant's uniform jacket. In another a very young woman in a nurse's outfit was carrying a wounded man on a stretcher through ruins.

'Valentina!' Victor explained pointing to his wife with a mischievous wink.

In other photos Victor was shown playing the accordion surrounded by soldiers. In a silver frame on the piano presided a scarlet ribbon and a gilded silver medal with the effigy of Lenin on it. This was the prestigious order bearing the name of the father of the Soviet people given to Victor on 15 August 1941 in the heat of battle, for acts of bravery in the desperate defence of Minsk against Hitler's forces.

In all the homes we went into we were to find similar mementos of sacrifices endured, like all those little obelisks we spotted at random along our route with their red stars, an old machine gun and a plaque citing the heroic act they commemorated. Our discovery of the photographic mementos of this Soviet couple confirmed for us what a dreadful nightmare the war against Hitler must have been for the Russians. Hence, no doubt, the omnipresent

propaganda advocating peace. Hence too, Victor and Valentina's warm welcome of foreign visitors.

Valentina had just joined us. She was a pretty fair-haired woman, with a determined face illuminated by two large slightly slanting green eyes. She looked just like the model woman in the posters assuring us that 'Soviet women are building Communism'. An official in the railway administration and a Party member liker her husband, Valentina was also a Soviet deputy for one of the city's districts where she dealt with cultural activities, which explained the presence of a few books in their small flat on Kirova Road. Much to our astonishment, *Le Père Goriot* and *Madame Bovary* featured among the titles in the Sicheikos' library.

Russian hospitality never ceased to amaze us. We had no sooner sat down with Slava and Victor than Valentina covered the table with delicacies and cooked meats accompanied by steaming tea with a mellow aroma unlike any Indian or China tea we knew. We were drinking tea from Stalin's Georgia. Dissecting a family's existence, its way of life and thinking, into all its component parts, attempting to identify its pluses and minuses was no mean exercise. Slava, whose knowledge of the language of Molière we tested rigorously, performed outstandingly. When our progress in

Russian enabled us to verify certain details, especially numbers, we never found cause to doubt the honesty of our companion's translations. As for Victor and Valentina, they embarked upon this adventure with good humour. Salaries, benefits, bonuses, taxes, rent, activities - private and professional, leisure, holidays, food, clothing...they were to satisfy our insatiable appetite down to the last detail.

There was no doubt about it: by comparison with the vast majority of their fellow citizens (according to Khrushchev seven million Russians earned less than three hundred roubles a month), Victor and Valentina with their two basic salaries of two thousand roubles a month (about four times the minimum basic wage guaranteed to French workers), with long service and productivity bonuses on top, were unquestionably among the system's privileged. Especially as they paid practically no tax: barely three per cent of their salary, half of which went straight into Party coffers by way of a subscription. Like all Soviet workers, Victor and Valentina had nevertheless to pay a hundred roubles a month into a sort of national lottery called Zaouin which was drawn several times a year but which was really only a way of levying tax in disguise. Curiously, the homeland of socialism showed them no recognition for the three children they had given it. In Khrushchev's Russia, child allowance was paid only after the fourth child. For not having quite reached this

threshold, Victor and Valentina were even obliged to pay a two per cent tax on what they earned. Had they remained childless, this tax would have gone up to eight per cent.

On the other hand our Russian household benefited from a host of advantages which citizens of many a capitalist country would have envied. If they fell ill Victor and Valentina would continue to receive their salaries in their entirety because they could give proof of more than five years service in their company. In case of hospitalisation, all medical expenses were covered by the State. If, however, they were to decide to stay at home to recuperate from straightforward angina, there was no system to reimburse them for the purchase of medicines necessary for their cure. A social security system as generous as the one from which the French benefited or even the Italians or Spanish did not exist in the USSR we visited.

With a forty-six hour working week, twenty-four days annual leave plus six days public holiday, the Sicheikos were still among the favoured members of the proletariat. All the more so because their thirty-two square metres of living space cost them a tiny rent and they were charged a derisory price for their heating, water and electricity.

For one thousand three hundred roubles, that is to say a little less than a month's wages, they could buy a holiday entitlement from their union. This meant that when their turn on the list came, they could go and discover the delights of swimming in a former Tsarist palace in the Crimea that had been turned into a holiday resort. To date Victor and Valentina seemed to have preferred hiring a little cabin beside a lake an hour's train journey from Minsk to such extravagance. There, together with their three children, they gave themselves up to the simple pleasures of fishing and country walks.

From all of these excursions the Sicheikos brought back baskets full of vegetables and fruit. Valentina made no secret of the main difficulty she had as a Soviet housewife. Aliette and Annie accompanied her to the 'fine foods shop' on Irimanka Avenue where every evening she found herself caught up in interminable queues. Three years after the explosion of the first Soviet H bomb, a few months before a sputnik was launched into space, providing the Russian people with cabbages, carrots, sausages and milk definitely seemed an insoluble problem. One evening, Valentina's face appeared transfigured by some mysterious happiness. She told us the great news beginning to run through the streets of Minsk in the middle of that summer: cherries were due to arrive at the fine foods shop on Irimanka Avenue.

The big question was: were these very likeable Russians happy? The answer of course was 'Yes'. From six o'clock in the morning, when the voice of the official in charge of waking the city burst from the small loudspeaker which served as both alarm clock and radio on which to listen to the Radio Moscow news; until they went to bed after a game of chess at the railway workers' club, Victor and Valentina lived in a hermetically sealed and protected universe: a universe in which their only battle was to unearth cherries at one of the city's fine foods shops; a universe in which their hierarchy dealt with and regulated all the relevant employment questions. Deprived of foreign television channels, radio programmes and newspapers, they certainly did not enjoy any openness onto the world but at least they could enjoy the benefits of a system cleverly orchestrated by the refinements of a single mindset.

Seeking to be provocative, I asked Victor point-blank:

'When did you last have a strike at the engine works?'

The Russian railwayman looked bewildered.

'But Dominique, we've never gone on strike at the engine works!'

Slava came rushing to the assistance of his fellow countryman.

'My dear Dominique, the workers in the Soviet State are owners of their own means of production. So they can't strike against themselves...'

After three days of close cohabitation the moment had come for us to part. Aliette and Annie had emptied Victor and Valentina's wardrobe as well as the chest in the hall in which they carefully stowed away their winter things. We had drawn up an inventory down to the last handkerchief and pair of socks amongst our friends' clothing. We had gone with them and fifty thousand other fans to support the Minsk football team against that of Mao's China. We had accompanied them to the cinema to solve the enigma of East German thrillers or savour the boredom of propaganda documentaries. We had attended the weekly Party committee meeting for their district and we had sat in on several lessons at school number 4 with their children. In short we had shared the everyday life of a worker family in Khrushchev's Russia. At no point had we been obstructed in our research. Had Victor and Valentina suffered as a consequence of Stalin's tyranny? Certainly. But just three years after the death of the dictator, his memory seemed very far removed from them. The few very expurgated extracts

from Khrushchev's report published by *Pravda* several months after the 20th Party Congress had incited Party leaders in Minsk to gather together hundreds of the city's residents. The demonstration in which Victor and Valentina took part ended with a somewhat disconcerting explanation. 'The misdeeds committed by Stalin at the end of his life are a measure of the greatness of the man,' exclaimed the orator, 'for a small man does not make big mistakes.'

Fond farewells. Once again the table disappeared beneath a mound of delicacies, cold meats and cakes. Valentina's eyes were bright with emotion. She took out of her cupboard two earthenware doves and gave them to Aliette and Annie with a kiss. On the breast of each bird was engraved an inscription in Russian which Slava religiously translated. 'To our dear French friends from a family of Belarusian railway workers. Minsk. July 1956.' Our wives responded with little bottles of perfume and a Hermès scarf with the coat of arms of Paris on it. It was a deeply moving moment.

'Tell the workers of France how much we love them!' repeated Victor.

His melancholy eyes glistened. We were all on the brink of tears.

'*Spassiba bolchoï, dear Soviet friends!*' The road to Moscow was calling.

4

'TIFLIS TO KRASNADOR IS NOT LIKE PARIS TO NICE'

We had everything we could have wished for: from Minsk Slava had telephoned his wife Vera, and she was waiting for us outside Moscow's Savoy Hotel where Intourist had installed us luxuriously in two rooms larger than the Tsar's apartments in the Kremlin. Delightful Vera. With her turned-up nose, her impish dimples and her pretty mouth ever ready to smile she charmed all four of us from the very first. Shame she spoke not a single word of French or English. Twenty-seven year old Vera Natachanovna Petoukhova was a piano teacher at a secondary school. Of the outside world she knew only Romania where her husband had spent three years as a correspondent for his newspaper. With their son Sergei, aged seven, Vera and Slava lived in a Moscow suburb. We were never to find out where. Under various pretexts they never received us into their home.

We wanted to keep our stay in Moscow to a minimum in order to devote as much time possible to exploring rural Russia. But we were in the hands of a bureaucracy the slowness of which was legendary. While our wives and Vera took themselves off on the Moskova, traversing the capital in a river boat, Jean-Pierre and I made contact with the Intourist authorities. The fellow with the moustache in charge of our file received us with a warmth that said much about the exceptional nature of the authorisation we had been granted. Toying with a tiny globe in his plump fingers, he gave us a little speech in impeccable French.

'We are pleased, dear friends, to see that you have arrived safely in Moscow. We hope that you are getting on well with comrade Petoukhov and that his presence will be helpful to you.'

He proffered a packet of papirossi and lit one himself.

'We also hope that you will have a good journey through our country and that, unlike most of your colleagues, you will have your heart set on telling the truth about the Soviet Union. This said we have to sort out together a certain number of problems.'

I looked anxiously at Jean-Pierre. The Russian pushed back his chair, stood up and made for the map of his country

hanging on the wall, a gigantic patch of red dwarfing the rest of Europe.

'Friends,' he went on, 'it is vital that your journey is properly organised because you are real pioneers. Tiflis to Krasnador, for example, is not like Paris to Nice!'

Obviously proud of his cosmopolitan knowledge of tourism, he burst out laughing. Then he sat down again and declared with authority:

'So we should see each other again to work out the details of your itinerary. We will call your hotel to arrange a meeting. Au revoir, my friends.'

And he got up. Jean-Pierre and I were so surprised that we did not dare ask for any kind of explanation.

So it was that we met again several times in that same room for long discussions with officials obviously wanting to leave nothing to chance. One day our tovarich would be flanked by a highways specialist; on another it would be a petrol supplies expert; on yet another it would be someone in charge of mechanical repairs. To each one of these very serious bureaucrats we tried to explain that the unexpected was also part of the charm of the journey and that for this reason it seemed pointless to 'overplan'. But each time we came up against a knowing smile which seemed to say: 'You

can already count yourselves extremely lucky to have been given permission to come this far in a car. Don't complicate things!'

As it turned out, despite all the Intourist authorities' efforts, there was no lack of adventures.

An institution at least as famous as Lenin and Stalin's mausoleum stood facing it on the other side of Red Square. Gum was the great flagship store for Muscovites, the pride and joy of all Russia. By as early as seven o'clock every morning thousands would be crowding up against its doors in long queues ready, as soon as they opened, to spill over the forty-three thousand square metres of sales floor in its kilometres of departments; for there was always merchandise to buy and there were always sales on at Gum, a veritable miracle in a Russian economy better known for the precariousness of its supplies.

Aliette turned Gum into her headquarters. To a well-informed woman in charge of fashion at the Bazar de l'Hotel de Ville in Paris this sudden incursion into the temple of popular Russian luxury, where the lingerie department had metal boned bras on display, was worth an extended visit.

'You should record the life of a Gum sales assistant!' she urged when she got back from one of her explorations. 'Apparently there are two hundred and fifty of them in the toiletry department alone.'

The idea was greeted with enthusiasm. That way the concerns of the Intourist bureaucrats would not prolong our stay in Moscow for no purpose. We gave Aliette with Slava's help, the task of picking the young woman to be the protagonist of the second instalment of our report on lives of the Russian people.

The venture got off to a bad start. The first sales assistant contacted in the fur hat section fell ill. The second in the shoe department disappeared all of a sudden. As for the third from the underwear department, her parents forbade her all contact with foreigners. It was the purchase of an ordinary tooth brush at a counter in one of the innumerable toiletry departments in a section of the store romantically christened 'Gallantry' which finally solved our problem.

Sales assistant Genia Gregorieva, aged twenty-three, presented the perfect profile of a young modern Soviet woman: tall, distinguished, open, apparently in full bloom. Slava was to have no difficulty in obtaining her agreement and that of her parents, decent retired civil servants living with their daughter in Moscow's extensive suburbs. We met

up with Genia at six thirty next morning when her alarm went off in the small quarters she shared with her parents on Moscow Way to the east of the capital. Tiptoeing to avoid waking anyone, she then shut herself away in the miniscule communal bathroom the Gregorievs shared, like the kitchen and toilet, with another family, the accommodation crisis being an endemic wound in the capital of the world's second nuclear nation as elsewhere in the USSR.

Her ablutions completed, Genia went into the kitchen to prepare a breakfast to make Western dieticians shudder: thick vegetable soup, cheese, cold meats, black bread and tea. Then, after brushing her thick blonde hair, she slipped on a floral dress, applied a suggestion of red to her lips and folded up her sheets and blankets which she hid behind a cushion. It was ten past seven by the time she noiselessly closed the door to the family home. Half an hour later the packed No 9 tram along Moscow Way deposited her in the centre of town. She had only then to cross Grand Theatre Square and take the avenue which ran to the left up to Red Square and Gum.

Pushing her way through the flood of people already besieging the store, she managed to get into one of the vast halls that led to her toiletry counter. After putting on her prestigious blue overall decorated with the Gum insignia,

she happily inhaled the perfumed emanations of her display. Genia liked these perfumes so much that that she had decided to study to become a perfume chemist, a specialty by no means common in a society more used to manufacturing basic goods than luxury products such as perfumes and cosmetics. The number of items her department had to offer was less than a hundred whereas in France or America it would exceed a thousand. As a specialist in the subject Aliette had been surprised since our arrival by the colourless, sallow complexions of female faces. She had found that Russian women used only a touch of the palest lipstick by way of make-up and that there was never the slightest trace of powder, cream or blusher on their faces.

Yet there too, it seemed things had changed since the death of the little father of the people. At least so the pretty Anna Antonovna, the 'Gallantry' department's manageress, informed us. With the advent of Malenkov, the Soviet woman's face had assumed some colour. The wife of Stalin's podgy successor, hardly a beauty herself nor a phoenix of elegance, had in fact started to encourage the use of creams, lipstick and powders. She made speeches inviting Soviet women workers to assert their femininity. She even encouraged them to stay at home, an idea not devoid of daring in a country where the vast majority of families needed at least two salaries.

Genia Gregorieva's payslips would have made the humblest salesgirl at the Bazar de l'Hotel de Ville in Paris pale with compassion. After deduction of all taxes and more or less voluntary contributions, she was left with six hundred and five roubles for a forty-six hour working week, the price of a pair of court shoes or a summer dress. To this modest sum, a third of which she gave to her parents to provide for the family expenses, were added a certain number of bonuses calculated according to her department's sales results. Some months, such as in spring when nature encouraged renewed coquetry, this profit-sharing could double her basic salary. But it had taken two years of patient saving for three summer dresses, a spring or autumn coat and two pairs of shoes to find their way into our sales assistant friend's wardrobe. In any case she seemed to have derived her satisfaction from the pursuit of other objectives. Four evenings a week from seven to eleven Genia went off to work towards her diploma in perfume chemistry on the benches of the technology faculty of Moscow's Popular Institute of Economics. There she learned chemistry, physics, mathematics, English and, the discipline sacrosanct in any Soviet educational course, the basic tenets of Marxist-Leninism. We went with her one evening to the institute. Discussions were well underway among the students before the instruction began. Studies, cinema, music, holidays, parties...nothing escaped the general

interest. To our surprise someone even broached a subject of which, according to Slava, young people had become particularly fond in Khrushchev's Russia: politics. For politics read culture, the culture which nourished young Soviets from the tenderest age.

Genia and her friends belonged to the gigantic Komsomol[1] organisation which Stalin used to say was 'the flesh of the flesh and the blood of the blood of the Bolshevik party.' In the twenty million young people packed into the bosom of its ranks, the implacable dictator had consistently seen the 'vigour that was going to build up communism'. You entered the Komsomol a little as you entered religion. From the age of ten, Genia had worn the red scarf of the 'Pioneers' at her neighbourhood school. Put in charge of the wall mounted journal which, in Soviet establishments, showed pupils in text and pictures the achievements of socialism and setbacks of capitalism, Genia got herself noticed for her leadership talents. One day she wrote an essay explaining why she wanted to become a Komsomol member. The text was made up of six pages of large, careful handwriting and concluded with the declaration of love sent to Stalin by the Komsomol on the occasion of their last congress. 'Comrade Stalin,' it said, 'by the sun of your life every corner of the earth is illuminated! Stalin, flag of the great fight; Stalin, sun of our national destiny; Stalin,

happiness of Soviet men, Stalin, pride and glory of victories; Stalin, wisdom of immortal ideas: Stalin, Lenin of our present years!'

It was not long before Genia made her well-deserved entry into the highly-coveted Komsomol fold. A few weeks before Aliette discovered her behind her perfume counter in Gum, she had just celebrated her birthday when she was abruptly informed that a special meeting was to be held in her institute's amphitheatre. All her comrades were also forewarned. Delegates posted at the entrance to the hall checked to make sure everyone had their Komsomol card. Inside the temperature continued to mount. What might the purpose of such a convocation be? Finally a student leader appeared on the scene and there was silence. He announced he was going to read an important document from the recent historic meeting of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Genia would tell us that this was a terribly cruel experience for her and her comrades. Khrushchev's revelations came as a real shock. Like nearly all Russians, she had loved Stalin sincerely. Twice in her life she had had the privilege of seeing him. The first time had been when she was a very little girl perched on her father's shoulders during her district's May Day parade in Red Square. The

second was when, dressed as a Pioneer (in a black skirt, white blouse and red scarf), she had taken part along with all the other Moscow schoolchildren in a huge parade in honour of the victory over fascism.

The birth of an idyll with a tall, rather thin, young man by the name of Grenadium Dimitrievic came opportunely to eclipse the trauma inflicted by the demystification of Russia's venerated leader. He was twenty-five years old. He had a scholarship at Moscow's Institute of Political Economics where he was studying to be a professor. 'Love dawned in the bourgeois decadent fashion of Western films,' Genia admitted to us with amusement. Since then she had met up with Grenadium every week. Judging her parents too old-fashioned (her mother had forbidden her to go out at night or wear lipstick until she was twenty), she saw him at her best friend Olga Ivanovna Kordeva's home, whose family lodgings in Parkovaïa Street had a small television equipped with a magnifying glass, and a gramophone.

Seated demurely side by side on the divan or dancing modestly to the tunes of 'Istanbul', 'Constantinople' or 'Feuilles mortes' sung by Yves Montand, the latest hits among

Muscovite youth, Grenadium and Genia faced the future with confidence.

A little before midnight Grenadium would accompany his young lady home by tram. As they parted for the week the two lovers would exchange no more than a shy kiss. In three years time when they both had their degrees, they would be able to marry. But like the vast majority of young couples living in Khrushchev's era, they would only be able to set up home in a twenty-seven square metre flat, the one they would share on Moscow Way with Genia's parents.

'Where would you like to go for your honeymoon?' asked Annie.

The query left Genia visibly perplexed. Like all Russians, she would not be permitted to go beyond her country's frontiers. The idea of she and Grenadium saving up for an escapade to Paris, Rome, or even another country in the socialist bloc, was thus completely out of the question.

'The Soviet Union is not short of dream destinations for newly-weds,' responded our sales assistant friend with a smile.

Born under Stalin, a young woman under Khrushchev,

under whom would she be a wife and mother? By way of goodbye Genia Gregorieva gave us the lament everyone was singing in Moscow in those days following de-Stalinisation. It was that of a mother singing her child a lullaby:

Sleep, little girl, sleep, sleep little girl, sleep.
I'm going to tell you a story: was Lenin good?
Good, little girl, good, sleep little girl, sleep.
I'm going to tell you a story: was Stalin good?
Bad, little girl, bad...very bad,
Sleep little girl, sleep.
I'm going to tell you a story: is Khrushchev good?
We shall know when he is dead, so sleep,
little girl, sleep.

[1] *Komsomol served as the youth wing of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*

5

'DOMINIQUE, THE SOVIET UNION WILL BE HERE FOR A THOUSAND YEARS!'

The Intourist tovarichi could sleep in peace: they had at last dealt with all the headaches that our great motorcar première on their country's roads seemed to cause them. We were authorised to take the road south, the 'blue route' which would take us from Moscow to Tiflis, via Kharkov, Kiev, Yalta and Sotchi into Georgia. Slava had managed to borrow a car from his paper in which to accompany us with Vera. It was as if he had been transformed. He had passed his driving test specifically for this crazy adventure. He split his sides laughing when we told him he looked like a super-capitalist at the wheel of his beige Pobieda.

Before the grand departure, Jean-Pierre and I went behind the Metropol Hotel to fill up with petrol at the only pump selling super in the whole of the Soviet Union. The poor Marly had no idea to what a Calvary she was going to

find herself condemned once the last drops of this Muscovite elixir had been drunk.

Farewell Moscow! Kharkov: six hundred kilometres.

At the speed Slava was going it would take us six months to wrap up our itinerary. At our first stop I ran over to ask him to speed up. I found him perspiring at the steering wheel but radiant with joy. Vera was in the process of preparing him a generous sandwich and on the floor lay several bottles of Narzan, Soviet mineral water.

'I can't go any faster,' he apologised, 'my car is almost new. The man in charge at the garage told me not to exceed sixty kilometres an hour.'

Getting to Kharkov in one go was out of the question. We decided, therefore, to stop half way in one of the little motels that cropped up every three hundred kilometres on the Moscow to Yalta road. With its wrought iron balconies and whitewashed walls, from outside the building looked like a Spanish parador. The inside was unfortunately less engaging. Confronted by the dirtiness of the rooms and the washing facilities shared by the whole floor, our wives could not contain a cry of horror.

Eager to discover the secret charms of a Soviet car, I

suggested to Slava that I leave the steering wheel of the Marly to Jean-Pierre and take that of the Pobieda. I took advantage of this exchange to ask him to translate the slogans on the innumerable propaganda boards that lined the flat straight road into infinity.

A railway worker pointed his fist in the direction of a locomotive and exclaimed: 'COMRADE RAILWAY WORKERS WE MUST COMPLETE THE SIXTH FIVE YEAR PLAN WITH HONOUR.'

Further on a beaming worker pointed to a dam under construction in Siberia: 'FRIENDS, COME AND JOIN US. HELP BUILD THE SOVIET UNION OF TOMORROW.'

Further on again, an athlete in a singlet was brandishing a standard on which could be read: 'ONWARD TO NEW SPORTING SUCCESSES.'

And even further on, a soldier was cutting through barbed wire: 'TO THE COURAGEOUS THERE ARE NO OBSTACLES. STRENGTHEN YOUR WILL!'

Every kilometre the appeals for peace were repeated. In one place five words stood out from a transparent background: 'PEACE TO THE WHOLE WORLD'. In another the image of an armed soldier in a helmet emerged from a map of the USSR: 'OUR COUNTRY IS THE

BULWARK OF PEACE'. Further on, a woman in a headscarf with a child in her arms cried: 'NO TO WAR.' At the bottom of the poster the word 'PEACE' was written in a multitude of languages.

I marvelled aloud.

'Slava, why this abundance of slogans for peace? Why do people talk so much about peace in the USSR? Why is the word peace everywhere, on the roads, in the newspapers, on the radio, at the cinema? Do the Soviet people have such a warrior instinct that the idea of peace has to be drummed into them at every opportunity? In France, Europe, America, in every country in the world people want peace but nowhere else is it the obsession that it seems to be here. In any case, if by some disaster, there is another war, the Soviet people will have less to say about it than any other.'

Slava laughed loudly. He had an answer to everything.

'Dominique, you don't understand... All this propaganda for peace doesn't come from Moscow. It comes directly from the people themselves. It is the peasants, the local Soviets, the workers who put up these placards to constrain our leaders to think only of peace. Peace, Dominique, should be our first idea, our most immediate thought, because it is indispensable to socialist construction.'

Further on the placard serenade to peace alternated with graphs relating to the sixth Five Year Plan. The posters were all to the same design. Superimposed bottom left, a date: 1955 and a number: 100. Top right, another date: 1960 and a variable number, often several 100s. A line joined the two dates and also showed the increase envisaged by the plan. The bottom of the notice sometimes depicted a peasant woman with a basketful of beet or with sheep, sometimes a factory worker at a furnace with liquid steel, sometimes a miner on a heap of coal, sometimes peasants carting sacks of wheat, and sometimes a lumberjack and tree trunks.

Further on still, a little girl with long blonde plaits brandished a book, exclaiming: 'LET US BE MASTERS OF GOOD LANDS AND SCIENCE', or a portly farmer in a straw hat held up at arms length an enormous watermelon, urging ecstatically: 'LET US FARM THE USSR WELL'.

I decided not to allow our dear Slava any respite.

'Slava, what an odd idea it is to be forever talking about work, peace in work, joy in work, love in work, abundance in work. It took the Nazis to proclaim 'work sets you free' at the entrance to their death camps. Work is man's punishment, humanity's scourge... With automation man is going to be able to free himself from the obligation to work. In five, ten years time people will not have to work

more than three days a week and that will be a fantastic step towards happiness...'

Scandalised, Slava nervously lit up a cigarette.

'Dominique, work is the basis of the socialist construction which is in the process of liberating the world. Here there can be no capitalist crises. We always need more workers. There is no unemployment. We have put an end to the exploitation of man by man and that is why work, rather than being slavery as it is with you, is a joy...'

Slava had barely finished speaking when we overtook a caravan of wagons full of men, women and children squatting on bales of hay in the middle of a whole jumble of cooking utensils and camping equipment. They gave us big friendly waves. I realised they were gypsies or rather tsiganes as they were called there.

'Strange those people,' commented Slava sadly. 'They don't want to work like the rest of us. Why don't they live in a town? Why don't they have regular employment useful to the community? I can't understand...'

'They probably prefer freedom to anything else,' I said. 'Their need to live without constraints, their very long-standing traditions...But what surprises me most is that they've been able to continue existing on the edge of Soviet

society. How is it the authorities have never forced them to integrate into some group?'

Slava nodded his head.

'I don't know,' he sighed sadly. 'Perhaps it is actually out of respect for their independent past.'

A line of grey houses. A long wall surmounted by watchtowers. A double set of tram lines. We were coming into Kharkov.

It was Slava who obliged us to stop in this charmless industrial city. He wanted to get the wing of his car repaired, having scratched it slightly in a brush with a lorry as we were leaving Moscow.

'The repair will only take the excellent "technicians" at the great local garage three or four hours,' he assured us.

Every time he wanted to prove something to us, he imbued his words with so much passion that his face turned scarlet. With a mischievousness he did not pick up, we intimated that it might perhaps be wiser to defer the repairs until we got back to Moscow just in case there was another similar incident...

'Out of the question,' he protested, horrified, 'the police could investigate the origins of the scratch and I could get into trouble with my paper.'

Slava was an extraordinarily disciplined man. His respect for authority had something almost fanatical about it.[1]

Kharkov's 'great local garage' as Slava had respectfully called it, looked more like a breaker's yard that a temple to modern mechanics. In fact the only vehicles being repaired were lorries, the private car not yet really having made its appearance in Khrushchev's Russia. Slava unearthed the tovarich in charge, who examined the work to be done with a dubious air. It took all our friend's powers of persuasion to induce him to take on the repair, and Slava would still have to procure the replacement headlamp rim and the three chrome bars of the radiator grille himself. Kharkhov's great garage did not have these parts. So off we set on the tram to the centre of town where the only supplier of spare Pobieda parts in the whole city was located. Endless talk went on with the salesman, then with the tovarich manageress. They had been out of those parts for three months. But the manageress asked us to call by again in two hours time because a delivery had just arrived from Gorki where the car was produced.

Two hours later the response was negative. Nowhere in

the whole of Kharkov (six hundred thousand inhabitants) was there such a thing as a headlamp rim and three radiator bars for the USSR's most popular car. Slava would have to make do with having his wing hammered out and repainted.

We took advantage of this delay to go in search of petrol. Despite all our companion's efforts, finding acceptable fuel was a permanent challenge. Asphyxiated by a chronic lack of octane and kilos of impurities, our eight cylinders were choking. In vain we filtered petrol through a felt hat folded into three layers, every time we stripped down the carburettor we found whole particles of brick dust and various other impurities. Kharkov having no 'Super' pump, we eventually tried our luck at a military depot outside town in the hope of finding a few litres of a brew more suited to the tastes of our delicate V8.

The attendants at the depot received us in a way which would have made our motorway service station attendants roar with laughter. They went and fetched a three hundred litre barrel and rolled it onto some scales to weigh the contents. From it they then filled some buckets of dubious cleanliness which they came and emptied into the Marly's tank and jerry cans. At the end of the operation they weighed their barrel again. The difference indicated the volume supplied and therefore the price to be paid. Slava, who had

rejoined us with his Pobieda at last repaired, refused categorically to take advantage of this bounty to refuel.

'Dominique, this petrol is far too refined for my Pobieda engine,' he protested with aplomb. The mechanics in Moscow told me my car will only run on low grade petrol.'

Marvellous Slava! He lacked any spirit of criticism and was so set in the mould of his socialist thinking, that he would probably have willingly put water in his tank if a 'tovarich technician', as he respectfully called any professional driver or mechanic, assured him it was the fuel best suited to the smooth running of his car.

On the way out of Kharkov we made our acquaintance with what the Russians called a 'prophylaxis station'. In fact this was a service station where we had the Marly greased much to everyone's curiosity and delight. We had very little choice about the oil change. There was only one quality of oil in the USSR and it was as dark and thick as what we had just taken out of our engine.

Slava then invited us to spend the night in the motel next door to the 'prophylaxis station'. Surprise, surprise: the parking lot in front of the establishment was full. True we were on the only tourist route in the country, but to whom did all those small cars belong? Our companion proved

incapable of providing a precise answer. Senior Party members? Company directors? Artistes? 'Anyone and everyone,' he confined himself to saying, proud to have us discover a different image from the one hitherto presented by living standards in the workers' homeland.

All the individual rooms in the motel being occupied, we found ourselves obliged to take a dormitory with six beds in it, adorned with a huge portrait of Khrushchev. Contrary to my fears, the prospect of this Franco-Soviet cohabitation delighted Aliette and Annie. They would at last be able to find out why Vera, Slava's wife, who was on the thin side, was endowed with such a voluminous posterior when she wore trousers. The answer was whispered to us when we got up next morning. Our Russian friend wore under her trousers a thick woollen shirt and all in one padded underwear. As for Slava, blue linen shorts served him simultaneously as long johns, shorts during the day and pyjamas at night. Aliette and Annie had noticed that before going to bed he said goodnight to his wife but without giving her so much as a kiss on her mouth, cheek or forehead. Our shared intimacy with this young couple led us to believe that when it came to love the Russians were the most modest people in the world.

Astounding, extraordinary, unimaginable! The country that had made atheism its State religion, the country where the concept of God no longer existed except in the souls of a few toothless old babushkas, the country that had replaced faith with the hard-line materialism of Marx and Lenin was now welcoming us to Kiev with a ceremony one might have thought buried for ever in the annals of history: a church wedding under the cupolas of Saint Vladimir's cathedral.

Joy of joys, the bride and groom were ordinary furniture factory workers. Their names were Vladimir Ivanovich Tsurko and Maria Alexandrovna Ulanovna. They were twenty-four and twenty-two years old. Both looked as if they were concentrating extraordinarily hard which accentuated their pale, emaciated faces. One could sense they were aware of doing something extraordinarily daring. They had put on their finest clothes: in his case, a white shirt with an open collar and a grey woollen suit that was a little too generous for his slender shoulders; in hers, a white calf-length rayon dress and a headdress of paper flowers. They both carried an icon of Saint Vladimir pressed to their chests.

A whole procession of young people, the girls with their arms full of flowers, thronged behind the bride and groom to accompany them into the cathedral. A few babushkas in headscarves made the sign of the cross piously as they went.

Slava and Vera gazed at the scene with astonishment they did not try to hide. They were obviously at the theatre.

A venerable Orthodox priest with a long white beard, a cope richly decorated with gold thread and precious stones over his shoulders, welcomed the young people on the cathedral parvis. Vladimir deposited the wedding rings on the gilded saucer held by a young deacon with long hair. The priest at once blessed the couple and presented each of them with a candle. The procession then moved on in the direction of the iconostasis while the solemn, powerful voices of a choir singing the glory of the Lord resounded beneath the vaults. We could not believe we were in the Soviet Union. Slava and Vera, both musicians, listened enchanted.

Led by the deacon with the long hair, the couple to be married came and knelt on the steps of the choir. The priest then asked Vladimir whether he consented to take Maria to be his wife. Then he posed the same question of the young woman. As soon as the vibrant 'Yes' of the couple was spoken, the deacon with the long hair began to recite a long invocation in a stentorian voice. I asked Slava to translate a few bits of it but he proved to be absolutely incapable of doing so.

'I don't understand what he's saying,' he protested, 'he's

speaking old Russian. And then he keeps saying 'Him', 'Him', 'Him'... I don't know what he's talking about.'

'Probably Jesus Christ', ventured Aliette in an undertone.

'I don't know...or perhaps Saint Vladimir...'

I would later learn that it was the famous Orthodox prayer in which the bride and groom give thanks to God for granting that men and women may be one in the sacred bonds of marriage.

The priest then blessed the couple and invoked the grace of obedience for young Maria.

Then began the all important part of the ceremony: the coronation. While the deacon positioned the traditional crown above the head of the young man, the priest raised his hand in benediction before pronouncing the customary formula: 'The servant of God Vladimir Ivanovich Tsurko is married (literally 'crowned') to Maria Alexandrovna Ulanovna.

Immediately afterwards Maria was subject to the same ritual while the choristers intoned a hymn which spoke, Slava translated for us, of the obedience of a wife to her husband and of their union in the image of that of Christ with his Church.

Slava stumbled noticeably over the translation of the last part of the formula. But I promised to light his Marxist-Leninist lantern at the first possible opportunity by giving him a lesson in theology.

The interminable Orthodox marriage liturgy went on in its every detail. The cathedral had filled with a prayerful crowd among which I noticed a very large number of young people. I thought of our friend, the Gum sales assistant, her fiancé Grenadium and their Komsomol comrades at the Popular Institute. The Russian youth we were encountering that morning was completely different. Only yesterday we would never have guessed it existed, so built upon a single ideology, so set in the same mould had this country appeared. During a conversation at the wheel of his Pobieda, Slava had assured me with the kind of candid certitude that always made his affirmations impressive:

'Dominique, the Soviet Union will be here for a thousand years!'

On the way out of the cathedral, a photographer was waiting for the newly-weds with his enormous contraption, his shutter release and his black veil. I could not help wondering who, apart from the few friends who were there, would ever see the photo of that young couple, what history

book would ever publish the picture of those two young people in Khrushchev's Russia who were not afraid to show they believed in God. After the photo, to the obvious discomfort of our guide, we all four went over to present Vladimir and Maria with a few gifts and wish them happiness and long life.

[1] *We, for our part, had had to risk driving without insurance, not having been able to find prior to our departure, any company, not even Lloyd's of London, prepared to cover us in case of accident on Soviet roads. The pretext given was that it would be impossible to assure the defence of foreign citizens in Soviet courts.*

6

IN THE CLUTCHES OF THE MILITARY POLICE RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF A TOP SECRET MILITARY BASE

The Ukraine, the wheat granary for Russia in all its vastness! It was on a kolkhoz in the vicinity of Kiev that we hoped to find a third person, a peasant, for our report on the Russians. The local Intourist man was quick to suggest we visit several kolkhozes in the Kiev area. We politely declined all official invitations. We would look for our kolkhoz and our peasant ourselves.

The route we happened to take was blocked just after an enormous placard of a bearded old man shouting to a young peasant: 'PUSH HARD, YOU'RE REPLACING ME', and vehicles had to proceed at a lower level for several kilometres. There was a surprising reason for this diversion. Buxom, barefoot peasant women were spreading the wheat

harvest over the dry asphalt with large wooden shovels. When the grain had dried out completely, they put it into sacks which they weighed and piled up on the verge from where trucks came to pick them up. Thus in the summer heat the moisture was evaporated out of the rich wheat from the Ukraine's black earth.

A dirt track leading to a cluster of buildings suddenly aroused our curiosity. Heaven help us! After several hundred metres the Marly skidded and slid up to its belly in soil saturated by the recent rains. It was impossible to move either forwards or back. This misadventure delighted Slava whom we were definitely involving in a far from conventional discovery of his country. Jean-Pierre immortalised our being stranded with the Leica that was always round his neck. As I tried to free the tyres off with a shovel, squads of soldiers appeared from all sides. An officer rushed at Jean-Pierre and grabbed his camera. Our Russian companion's cheery expression turned to one of consternation. We had obviously done something wrong by taking that road? But what?

The officer to whom Jean-Pierre refused to surrender his camera questioned Slava ferociously. That was how we discovered that our car and its unfortunate occupants had managed to land themselves right in the middle of a top security military zone where, to compound it all, we had

committed the crime of taking photographs. The officer commanded his soldiers to escort us to the building we had taken for a kolkhoz. It was surrounded by a double layer of barbed wire fencing and guarded by fierce looking sentinels with submachine guns at their sides. We were pushed into a completely bare room into which we were immediately shut, to much clanking of locks. A little light filtered through an opening protected by three thick bars. I went over to it and felt my heart come to an abrupt stop. What I saw made me fear immediate deportation to Siberia. On the vast terreplein in front of the building, actually lined up under camouflage netting were a dozen great anti-aircraft guns and a whole bundle of antennae pointing to the sky. I surveyed Aliette and Annie's faces but could detect no signs of anxiety. Khrushchev had been wrong to put us on our guard: the hazards of the Soviet roads would not drive our wives to ask for a divorce. Was it ignorance on their part? Our arrest seemed on the contrary to rather amuse them. This was not the case with poor Slava who knew precisely how precarious our situation was. The accusation of spying could put a brutal end to our journey. He himself would doubtless find himself seriously called to account for failing in the surveillance mission with which he had been charged. His voice reached us through the walls of our gaol. Would he be able to appease the soldiers' anger by displaying his Party card? Nothing could

be less certain. It was not impossible that in the USSR the army took precedence over the Party.

Our incarceration dragged on. Night fell. Finally the door opened and we were led into a harshly-lit room where two senior officers in red armbands were seated behind a long desk piled up with papers.

'These military police chiefs have come specially from Kiev to question you,' declared Slava. 'I will translate their questions for you'.

The first officer, a small hatchet-faced man, had us sit down in turn in front of him. Name, forename, nationality, date and place of birth, father's name and forename, number and date of expiry of passport, Soviet visa number... the officer meticulously recorded the answers in careful handwriting. Having finished these particulars, his colleague, a bald colossus with a ruddy complexion intervened to proceed with our interrogation. He wanted to know everything. What time we had left Kiev, why we had taken this road, why we had turned up the track, why we had got out of the car to take photos... He noted down our every explanation but none of them really seemed to satisfy him. He went back to the beginning, asking the same questions, twice, three times, five times. We made a superhuman effort to keep calm, to the great relief of Slava who was visibly

worried by this confrontation with his country's military police. The officer worked away at Jean-Pierre. What was he doing in a military zone with his camera? What photos had he wanted to take? To whom had he been intending to hand over those photographs? The paranoia of spymania had overtaken the policeman whose ruddy face had turned completely scarlet. He went on and on, working himself up.

Battle weary, he stood up and ordered the guards to take us back to the room where we had previously been confined. He and his colleague were going to compile the official report proving our culpability. We would know in an hour or two what fate awaited us. Slava seemed pessimistic in the extreme. Four French people caught red-handed taking photos in a military zone, the affair might get back to Khrushchev and, you never knew, even provoke an international crisis. Slava feared the police would search our vehicle from top to bottom. And even our bodies. In short, he prepared us for the worst.

It was almost midnight when the guards noisily unbolted the door to our gaol. We were taken back to the interrogation room filled with smoke from the policemen's papirossi. The officer with the ruddy complexion presented us with a six-page accusatory report which he and his colleague had just written up. We were aware that the future of our journey -

and possibly even our liberty - depended on the contents of those few sheets of paper that Slava was going to translate for us.

'We, the undersigned Colonel Illysef, Lieutenant Major Trigton, Lieutenant Major Pietrov and Private Bielli,' our interpreter began in a voice laden with worry, declare that on this day of 13 August 1956 at 1605, we saw a yellow and black car approach the installations of the Plizaïa military camp and stop. Several people got out to take photographs. These persons are:

1. Soviet citizen Petoukhov, Stanislav, who declared himself to be a correspondent for *Komsomolskaïa Pravda* and presented his identity card.
2. French citizen Lapierre, Dominique, who presented a French journalist's card according to which he was born in Châtelaillon, France on 30 July 1931.
3. French citizen Pedrazzini, Jean-Pierre, without identity papers[1], also claiming to be a French journalist.
4. French citizens Lapierre, Aliette and Pedrazzini, Annie, declaring themselves to be the spouses of the above-mentioned, without identity papers.

There followed six pages of a statement to make us tremble. In fact it accused us of intentionally entering the forbidden zone where we had been surprised, of having deliberately engineered the breakdown of our car by getting it stuck, and of having got out with a view to photographing targets located in the military zone in question.

We protested vehemently against the absurdity of these accusations. Those policemen could never have seen a spy film. Otherwise they would have known that spies showed greater discretion than we had done driving our black and yellow car. But they kept at us, especially the big bald one with the ruddy complexion.

'Give him your roll of film,' I said to Jean-Pierre. 'That'll show him we were acting in good faith.'

Aliette and Annie approved with relief. Jean-Pierre complied at once. He placed his camera in clear view in front of the officer, wound back the film, opened the body and presented him with the film.

'There you are,' he said. 'We have no desire to do a tour of Siberia. See for yourself whether there are any military secrets on our film.'

Pale as he was, all at once Slava turned as scarlet as the officer. He made a real effort to translate Jean-Pierre's words

into Russian. But the policeman's mouth broke into a surprising smile.

'You're wrong not to want to visit Siberia,' he said. 'It's a magnificent place. I have just spent four years there.'

Our handing over the film and the brief exchange about Siberia seemed miraculously to unblock the situation. The officer announced that he was disposed to give us back our freedom; on condition, however, that we acknowledge in writing that we had been correctly treated by the military authorities of the Soviet Union – something which we agreed enthusiastically to do.

Slava let out a cry of happiness. With the help of a team of soldiers we managed to wrest the Marly from the quagmire in which she was stuck. We were back in Kiev by the small hours, exhausted but relieved to have escaped the clutches of the Red Army.

This time we deserved nothing less than a triumphal arch. An arch crowned with a red star at the entrance to an authentic kolkhoz where we would console ourselves for our mishap among Soviet anti-aircraft guns and radar. From a

gigantic placard a group of peasants proclaimed: 'LET US BE THE CHAMPIONS OF FINE HARVESTS!' According to our ancient 1912 Baedecker we were on lands belonging to Prince Terechenko, an uncle of the last tsar Nicholas II: six thousand six hundred hectares cultivated at that time by an army of a thousand serfs. Renamed 'Bolshevik Kolkhoz', the estate now harboured four hundred agricultural worker families. With its hundreds of hectares of wheat, maize, rye, buckwheat and potatoes; its twenty-five thousand fruit trees; its two hundred and fifty cows; its three hundred and sixty pigs; ten trucks and three giant Kombine tractors, it was one of the most prosperous kolkhozes in the Ukraine.

Our sudden appearance caused a sensation. The combine harvesters and tractors suddenly fell silent, the chickens stopped scratching about, animals and people surveyed us, transfixed. Recovering from their surprise, some of the peasants led us to the office of a stout fellow in a straw hat. Nicholas Ossipovich, aged fifty-two, was the tarovich president of the enterprise. He was surprised he had not been forewarned of our visit but readily agreed to show us round his vast collective farm, an experience which would propel us this time into the pages of a Gogol novel. By chance on one track we actually encountered a real moujik out of *Dead Souls* with his long white beard; further on, a horde of fair-haired children ran barefoot behind our car.

Quite unexpectedly we entered an isba. To our surprise we found two icons on the wall on either side of an old yellowing photograph in a polished wooden frame. Was it a photo of Stalin? Or Lenin perhaps? No! It was a portrait of the tsar in the uniform of general-in-chief. Thirty-eight years after his assassination a picture of the last Romanov still presided in a peasant's isba in Khrushchev's Russia!

In front of another thatched isba, we found three generations of a family seated at table round a steaming pot of borsch. They all stood up together. It wasn't everyday that their boss Nicholas Ossipovich burst into their humble universe in the company of a foreign delegation. Here nothing had changed since the revolution. With their ruddy complexions furrowed with deep wrinkles, Ivan Chakarovich, the grandfather aged seventy-eight and his wife Evtimia Gabribrovna, seventy-six, were also real characters out of *Dead Souls*. They had been born and lived all their lives in this isba they had never owned. Their son Gregori Ivanovich, aged forty-two, had also been born there. He lived there now alongside his parents with his wife Natalia and their children, perpetuating the bond between these moujiks and their ancestral land. Gregori was a 'tractorist', which meant that he piloted the enormous Kombine tractors with twelve tynes that worked the soil of the kolkhoz. He was bright and likeable with large eyes as blue as the peaked cap stuck to the

back of his skull. There was no doubt about it; this was the peasant we needed to enlarge the portrait gallery begun in Minsk.

Finding out what a kolkhoz employee earned and identifying what advantages there were for him turned out to be a real headache. In the absence of calculators from an electronic era that had not yet made its appearance there, we had to get by with the only calculating instrument available in nuclear Russia: an abacus.

'How much does Gregori earn?'

The question seemed perplexing in the extreme.

'That depends on the acreage he works each day,' replied president Nicholas Ossipovich.

'So he's paid by the day and not monthly,' commented Annie. 'A system the communist unions in our country fight against unconditionally.'

Nicholas Ossipovich took off his straw hat and mopped his brow.

'Gregori also has a fixed salary independent of the area he works,' he elaborated. 'And like all workers here every month he gets a bonus based on the kolkhoz's profits.'

'A truly capitalist system!' exclaimed Jean-Pierre, which caused general hilarity.

Our difficulties were by no means over. Calculating the salary of Gregori's wife, Natalia, a little woman with scarlet cheeks, was even more complicated. She belonged to one of the enterprise's four 'animal divisions'. Twice a day she milked ten of the two hundred and fifty cows in the herd. Her salary depended on the number of litres of milk she extracted from her cows' udders. The result was converted into days worked. Ten litres represented one day.

'Natalia is one of the best women workers we have,' the president declared proudly. 'Last year she produced six hundred worked days.'

We were astonished by the figure.

'The quantity of milk she obtains does not depend solely on her,' Jean-Pierre pointed out, 'but above all on the cows. There are good and bad milkers.'

'We eliminate the bad ones,' the tovarich president interrupted sharply.

'Let's say there are good cows and less good cows,' Aliette rejoined calmly.

'That is taken into account,' said the man in charge

whom no objection seemed to throw. 'The number of days worked is calculated according to the production potential of each animal. All our cows are graded. There are no injustices here.'

We were amazed at the precision of it. What would the profoundly individualistic farm workers of our lands make of it? In all events the system had the merit of having developed a unique caste among peasants: accountant peasants. The Bolshevik kolkhoz had about fifty of them whose sole task consisted of using their abacuses to work out the production capacity of every worker and more particularly of every animal.

Through contact with Gregori and his family we were to discover the existence of a protected world in which all essential needs, be it children's education or everyone's health, were provided for by the kolkhoz. It was a world in which everyone's thinking was carefully fostered by a whole programme of meetings, lectures, propaganda sessions and official visits demonstrating the immense interest of the Kremlin leaders in the peasant masses of post-Stalinist Russia.

But our research at Ukrainian ground level revealed above all a truth that no official account would ever admit to: namely that in Gregori's heart and those of all the peasants we met there burned the lights from a secret garden.

Thirty metres long and twenty wide was the pitiful sixth of a hectare rectangle that Gregori, like all other Soviet peasants, was entitled to work freely for his own benefit. With touching pride this solid tractor driver showed us the nine peach and plum trees and the rows of potatoes, carrots, green beans and cabbages he had lovingly planted. As for his wife Natalia, she had us going into ecstasies over the only cow, the calf, two pigs, a handful of chickens, six ducks, three beehives, a dog and a cat that the Soviet State, in its magnanimity, permitted her to possess.

This courageous, open and likeable couple who knew neither the magic of television nor the advantages of household appliances already enhancing the lives of our peasants in France, Italy and Spain; this family rooted in the Russian land who would never dare dream of owning a car or going away on holiday, had only one aspiration that midsummer of 1956: that of at last being able to replace with an iron roof the thatch that had covered the family isba since its construction in the time of the last tsar.

Back in Kiev, I gave an account of our day to the hotel manageress, a stout, pleasant matron who took a keen interest

in our adventures and never missed an opportunity to show us how the USSR was now the freest country on the planet.

One evening she called out to me in English:

'*Gospodin* Lapierre, I'll tell you the latest word doing the rounds here: *"Lenin: communist; Stalin: sadist; Khrushchev: Intourist!"* '

And she went off with a great roar of laughter.

[1] *Passports were always kept by hotel reception for the duration of a foreigner's stay in a Soviet city.*

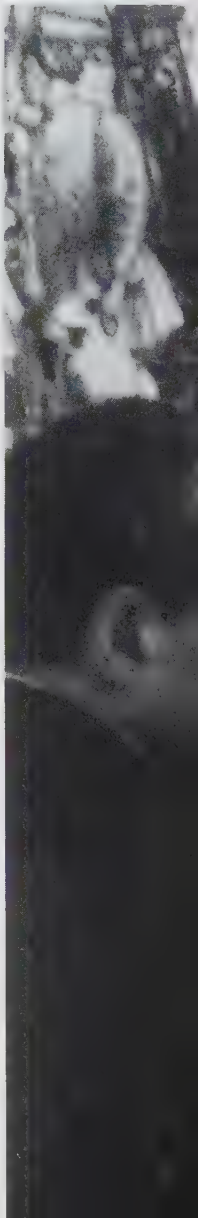
Our Wild Dream Comes True

The Russians! Here in Minsk, in their hundreds and thousands they rush to converge upon the bonnet of our car. Soon we are the prisoners of an astonished crowd marvelling at the appearance of us four Martians aboard our two-coloured 'spaceship'. For people who have never seen a foreign car before the spectacle is barely believable. Surrounded on all sides in our passenger compartment like fish in an aquarium, we use our few words of Russian to satisfy the general curiosity. Does this car belong to us? How many months' wages did it cost us? What is its maximum speed? are the first questions with which we are assailed at Minsk and throughout our thirteen thousand kilometre trip.

Minsk
Brest-Litovsk
Varsovie
Kiev
POLOGNE
UKRAINE
Dniestr
LOVAQUIE
HONGRIE
Odessa
ROUMANIE
Simféropol
YOUGOSLAVIE
BULGARIE
ALBANIE
MER

Gorki
SCOU
Monts Oural
Volga
R
S
S
Don
ov
Stalingrad
Oural
Rostov
Krasnodar
Caucase
Sochi
Soukhoumi
Gori
Poti
Tiflis
MER CASPIENNE
I E

The Unforgettable Handshakes of the Kremlin Leaders



Marshal Bulganin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers for the USSR (photo above) and his minister for foreign affairs, Molotov (photo right) grip my hand warmly during a reception in honour of the former French president, Vincent Auriol.

FCIA
A DÉCHIFFRER
VOIR AU VERSO la signification des principales indices

The First Encounters on a Fantastic Thirteen Thousand Kilometre Rally

Slava Petoukhov, the Soviet journalist we invited to accompany us, awaits us on the bridge separating Poland from the USSR (photo below left).

Our wives (Aliette left, Annie right) in front of the first signboard we came across on the road to Moscow (photo right).

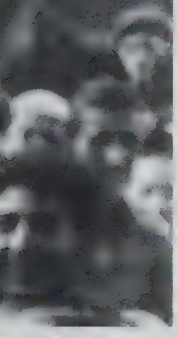
The first Russians we meet are two stone statues (photo below right): Stalin in conversation with the writer, Maxime Gorki. All along our route we were to find statues to the glory of the principle figures in the Soviet regime.

МОСКВА
ПЕРЕДЕЛКИНО
Омт.

Opposite the Kremlin and in Red Square, the Arrival of the Mythical Vehicle

The Marly serves as a platform for us to take our first photographs of the onion towered churches and bell towers of the Kremlin (above), then of Lenin's mausoleum in Red Square(right).

The presence of this foreign car and its crew in front of the Soviet regime's most sacred sanctuary caused a sensation. Thousands of the faithful queuing to enter the mausoleum suddenly dispersed to come and surround the strange apparition.



The Russians Enthusiasm for Charming Parisian Girls

In Rostov a soldier wanted to be photographed with Aliette and Annie (above). In Kiev I found myself with Aliette and Annie in the middle of a crowd of about a hundred people (left).

Our presence invariably provoked the curiosity of people who had never seen foreigners before. Women wanted to buy our wives' dresses to look 'like they do in Paris'. Men recited poems by Victor Hugo to them. Everyone asked us for French newspapers, even if they did not speak our language.

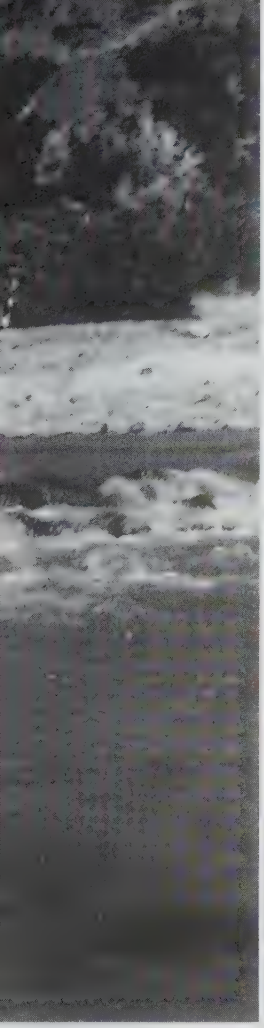
MARIE-CLAIRE
PARIS-MATCH
6106 · BS 78

A Dream Car for People Used to Travelling In Trucks

Our car painted in two colours gave rise to such astonishment that we had to be careful. Here, in Kharkov, a Russian has slipped under the body to examine the suspension (right).

In Sotchi, on the Black Sea, in the middle of the night we are submerged in a human sea (below left). In Tiflis in Georgia, the rector of the university, Victor Kupratzé, surrounded by his students, welcomes me with Annie and Aliette in front of the mythical car (below right).

PARIS MATCH



THE MARLY'S WAY OF THE CROSS THROUGH THE HELL OF CAUCASIAN ROADS

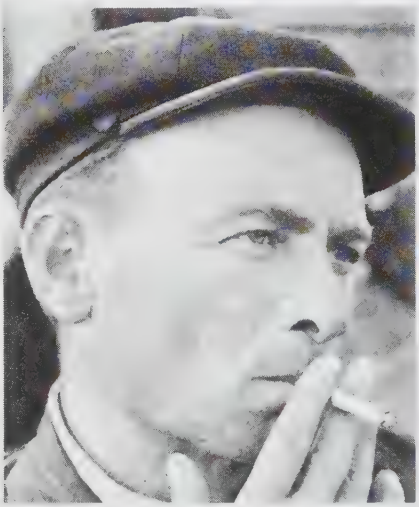
In the absence of bridges and fords suitable for vehicles, our car had to become amphibious. The water level soon reached the bumpers and doors (photo above left). Our personal effects were drowned in the black tide engulfing the passenger compartment.

(Photo left) Aliette, Annie and I get down into the icy water to try and shift the stones obstructing the tyres.

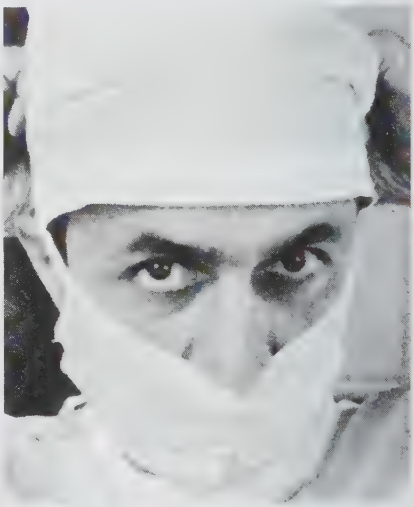
But after several metres, the Marly, with its engine flooded, is no more than a piece of flotsam in the middle of the stream. It takes the providential help of a jeep to rescue it from shipwreck (above).

The Minsk railway worker
Victor Anufrievich Sicheiko, aged forty-eight, 1,70m, foreman, Party member.
No 75, 2nd House, Kirova Street
Telephone: 97 46 13

The Moscow sales assistant
Genia Gregorieva, aged twenty-three, chestnut hair, student and sales girl in the 'Gallantry' department at Gum.
No 160 of 3rd House, Moskowska Way



The Ukrainian peasant
Gregori Ignatovich Klivtchouk, aged thirty, married, two children. Lived in the 'Bolshevik' kolkhoz, in the village of Chpitki, Kiev-Sviatochinsk district.



The Tiflis surgeon
Georgi Varlamovich Mossechvili, aged thirty-six, dark eyes, moustache, graduate in medicine no 024987, married, two children.
Address: 5, Georgitzé Road, Tiflis

Five Unforgettable Encounters for Our Russian Story

The Gorki factory worker

Ivan Gregorievich Sitnov, reference number T 406 at the Pobieda works, aged forty-seven, one child.

No 31 in 1st House, Krasnodonsev Street in Sovgorod.

Our journey enabled us to enter Russian homes quite freely. Everywhere we were received with warmth. Without constraint we shared the private lives of a Minsk railway worker, a departmental sales assistant in Moscow, a Ukrainian peasant, a Georgian surgeon and a car factory worker in Gorki.

ЖУРНАЛИСТЫ
ФРАНЦИИ

MAR

Soviet Petrol Ends Up Breaking the Spirit of Our Powerful Engine

Finding petrol compatible with the requirements of our engine's sophisticated mechanics was to be the constant nightmare of our journey. This pump behind the Hotel Metropole in Moscow was the only one in the whole of Russia to sell super. Before launching ourselves onto the Soviet roads devoid of service stations and garages, I filled the tank up with acceptable fuel for one last time.

A thousand kilometres further on our powerful car was no more than a juddering heap on the roads of the Crimea. The nearest Simca dealer was six thousand miles away and there were no garages for private cars. It was in a bus depot in Sotchi that we tried to decarbonise the engine head and then regrind the valves pitted by the poor petrol.

But after eight hours' work the mechanics' repair attempt failed. Falling apart with disappointment, I discovered the damage caused by the infamous fluid we had had to give our Marly.

That day the gods of socialism were with us. After twenty-four hours' effort the car was able to set off again, escorted as always by hundreds of amazed locals.

A First On Soviet Soil: Four Foreigners Camping Beneath Their Country's Flag

No foreigner had every spent the night on Soviet soil other than in a hotel approved by the police. This photo is a quasi historical document: the four of us have just woken up after our first night in a tent in the mountains of the Caucasus. In the small tent on the left, Slava and his wife are still asleep.

Aliette and Annie prepared a pantagruelian breakfast for our Russian friends.

But our solitude in this sublime spot was not to last long. Holidaymakers and mountain people came rushing to lavish all kinds of tokens of friendship on us. We were given honey, fruit and fish. In accordance with an old Georgian custom, a woodcutter did not hesitate to show me his unfailing friendship by kissing me passionately on the mouth.

Honeymoon With Slava and Vera, Our Wonderful Russian Friends

Learning about the life and mentality of the young Soviet journalist couple we had invited to accompany us was to be one of the great joys of our journey. Vera (on the left in the photo below right) whom I am hugging to me, was twenty-seven. She was a piano teacher at a secondary school in Moscow. She did not speak a word of French and her only knowledge of the outside world was of Rumania where her husband had spent two years as a press correspondent.

Slava (with Aliette in the photo below left), aged thirty-two, a hard line communist, was a Party member. His willingness, kindness and patience made our journey a particularly enthralling experience. One day he said to me: 'Dominique, the Soviet Union will be here for a thousand years.'

Two accomplices at breakfast (photo right) while our wives had slipped away. This tête-à-tête with Jean-Pierre in the peace of the Caucasus remains one of the special memories of our journey.

On the Black Ses Beaches, the Grand Sunbathing Session of the Regime's Privileged

To spend three weeks in one of the former palaces on the Soviet Riviera, holiday-makers had to pay a month's salary to their union.

While Jean-Pierre mustered all the Russian he knew to interview the guard on the great beach at Yalta (photo opposite lower right), we found a staggering expanse of pale flesh and spare tyres on the shingle. Potatoes, sausages, cabbage and black bread had taken their toll on bodies. Here there were no bikinis like there were in Saint-Tropez, but ample two-pieces that enveloped generous figures with difficulty. Aliette and Annie's swimwear made in France caused a sensation. Enthusiastic women bathers offered their ear-rings and bracelets in exchange for swimwear they would never be able to wear because of their corpulence.

The parasol held by this young woman (photo opposite lower left) was the latest fashion accessory on the Soviet beaches. It came from China.

Two Public Challenges to the Regime's Authority

In Kiev we came across a surprising scene in a country that had made atheism the State religion: a church wedding (photo right)

Vladimir Ivanovich Tsurko, twenty-four, and Maria Alexandrovna Ulanovska, twenty-two, both workers in a furniture factory, were having a church wedding under the cupolas of Saint Vladimir's cathedral. The ceremony was to last for three hours in the presence of a few elderly babushkas in headscarves, but also of a whole congregation of young people, a sign that the regime had not succeeded in rallying all Russian youth to the cause of hard line Marxist-Leninism.

It was in Soukhoumi, on the edge of the Black Sea, that we witnessed an even more extraordinary scene (photo below): a Russian kissing the small French flag that adorned our car. Georges Manoukian, aged thirty-two, was one of six thousand Armenians who left France after the war to settle in Soviet Armenia. This proved a disastrous choice. Many of those who, like him, tried to escape were swiftly recaptured and condemned to long years in a Gulag.

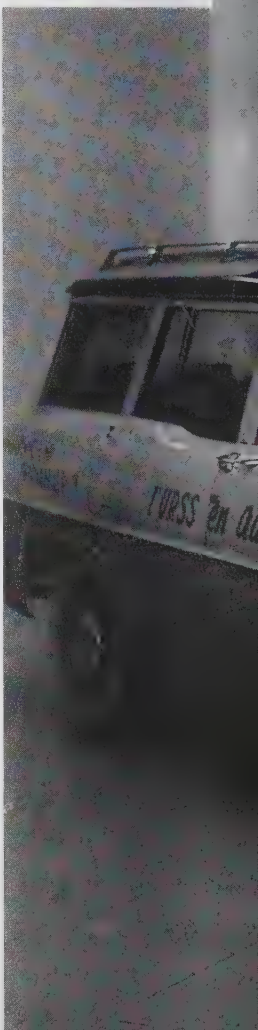
Georges Manoukian's gesture earned him arrest by the KGB after we had left. It took seven years for him to see his dream fulfilled: that of returning to Marseille.

The Marly's Farewells to Russian Soil and Her Return to the Champs-Elysees

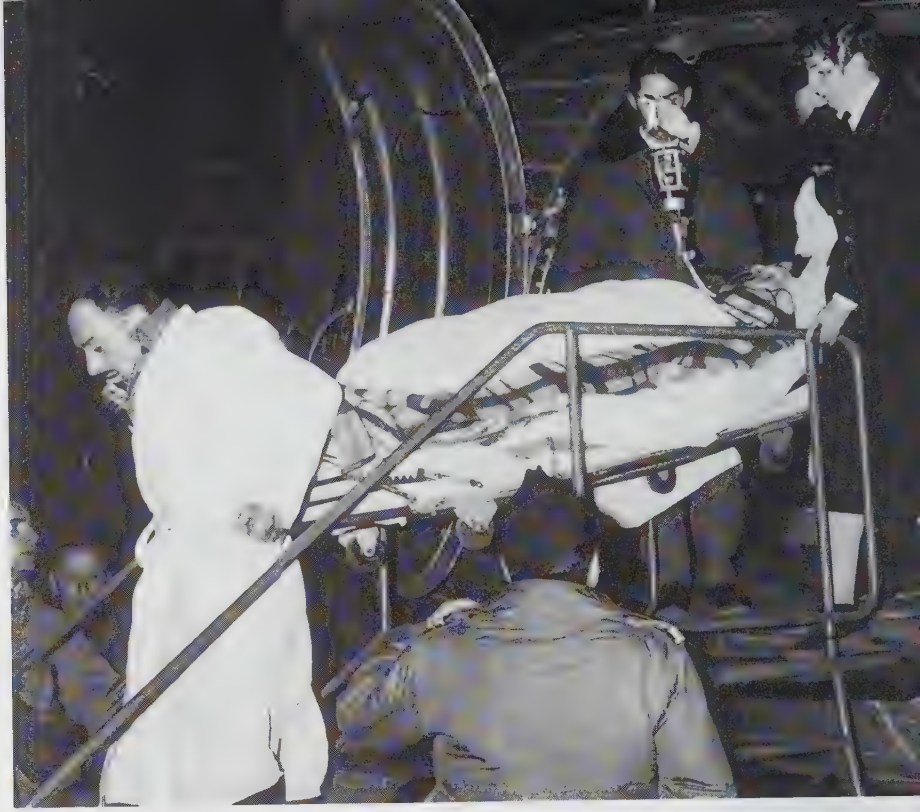
Crammed with tins of caviar, records, sets of Russian nesting dolls and miniature Kremlins we had been given, and covered in a thick dust in which innumerable Russians had written messages of friendship, our car left Soviet territory after thirteen thousand kilometres of adventures.

On the Brest-Litovsk bridge all the officials who had welcomed us three months earlier gave a last salute to visitors from another planet (photo above left)

In Paris the Simca representatives decided to place the vehicle returning from our grand journey on display to curious Parisians in the window of their showroom on the avenue des Champs-Elysée. A few days later, however, the shop management had swiftly to conceal the car under a cover when demonstrations broke out in Paris in support of the Hungarian insurrection (photo right).



15.000 KILOMETRES EN MARLY A
MARIE-CLAIRE
PARIS-MATCH
6106-BS78
LE MATERIEL DE VOYAGE
A ETE FOURNI
GRACIEUSEMENT
PAR LE BHV



History Deprives Us of the Pleasure of Savouring Our Exploit

A fortnight after our return, Jean-Pierre responded unhesitatingly to the appeal of *Paris Match*'s chief editor. On 30 October 1956 he was in Budapest outside the Communist Party HQ. The rebels of the Hungarian uprising were preparing to mount an attack on it. Soviet tanks appeared and fired into the crowd. Jean-Pierre was hit by three volleys of machine gun fire, in the legs, back and stomach – bullets from the tanks of Khrushchev, the Soviet leader who had opened his country's doors to us.

Along with all the editorial staff from *Match* I was at le Bourget (photo above right, in profile on the left next to the stretcher) when an air ambulance brought our fatally wounded friend back from Budapest.

In his last lucid moments (photo below right by Franz Goess) Jean-Pierre kept on asking for the shots of his report from Hungary.

After tearing out the page that showed him looking like a living corpse as he came out of the air ambulance that had brought him back to Paris, I took him his photo essay published in *Paris Match*. It was to be his last source of pleasure. Jean-Pierre died a few hours later.

The Vitriolic Article by Our Russian Companion Condemned to Exile in Siberia

Our first visit to Yalta had been for the famous Livadia Palace, formerly the summer residence of the tsars. It was in this palace that from 4 to 11 February 1945, the conference was held during which Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill drew up the post-war world map. At the entrance to the grounds stood, side by side, the chairs on which the three leaders came to sit for the historic photograph. I was determined to take my place on one of those seats for a photographic souvenir. Unfortunately we arrived five minutes after the grounds had closed. The palace being closed next day, I did not hesitate: I climbed over the gate.

Four months later, after the publication of our report in *Paris Match*, Slava Petoukhov was to publish a vitriolic article in *Komsomolskaïa Pravda* denouncing the way in which I had described the Russia we had discovered during our long holiday. To illustrate his critical text – which still did not absolve him from exile in Siberia – he used the photo he took just as I was straddling the Livadia Palace railings. With the caption: 'Journalism Western-style'. The kind of journalism for which Jean-Pierre had willingly given his life.

7

SHIPWRECKED IN THE ICY BLACK WATERS OF A CAUCASIAN TORRENT

Exuberant, colourful countryside suddenly succeeded the gloomy horizons of the Ukraine. We were arriving in the Crimea, the Soviet Riviera. 'YALTA 15 kilometres', a sign announced. Yalta! The Cannes of this Cote d'Azur with its famous extravagant tsarist palaces converted into holiday camps for petty officials and exemplary labourers in the workers' homeland. We rushed to the Livadia Palace. It was there, in the secret alcoves of this enormous architectural patisserie, that in former times the monk Rasputin seduced the heart of the last tsarina.

It was there, above all, that between 4 and 11 February 1945 three of History's giants redesigned the map of the world. Their names were Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin. In the wonderful tropical park

overrun with jacaranda trees and bougainvilleas, there were still the seats on which they had sat for the historic photograph that concluded their conference. Tourists could now come and sit on them to have their photographs taken. Alas we arrived too late. It was 6pm. The gate was locked and the next day it was closed. Never mind! The place was so symbolic that I had no reservations about overcoming my disappointment. Shamelessly I scaled the railings and jumped down on the other side to go and place my posterior on the legendary spot where Stalin had placed his. No one noticed Slava taking a photo at the precise moment I was straddling the top of the rails. A few weeks later, this shot would illustrate a vitriolic article he published about our journey on page one of *Komsomolskaïa Pravda*, with the perfidious caption: 'Journalism Western style'.

We were not the only French people in Yalta that day. Cruising on the Black Sea, the *Marseillaise*, a superb white Messageries Maritimes liner, was giving its luxury clientele a short trip on the pearl of the Soviet Riviera. So unusual was the event for the locals that it had given rise to a riotous display of enthusiasm. The quay was decorated with a sea of tricolour French flags and banners proclaiming in all kinds of languages 'PEACE TO ALL THE COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD'. The police in white jackets had the utmost

difficulty holding back the crowd shouting expressions of welcome to the passengers and sailors amassed on the decks. One request chanted with particular gusto stood out from the general cheering and applause. '*Gaziett, gaziett!*' The passengers and crew responded by raining down newspapers, magazines and even books onto the quay. One black sailor whose head emerged from a porthole caused an indescribable free-for-all when he lowered a bucket, into which he had piled all the papers he could find in the crew's quarters, on the end of a piece of string. The sight of all those enthusiastic Russians frenziedly snatching *L'Equipe*, *Cinémonde*, or *France-Dimanche* without for the most part knowing a single word of French, was extraordinary. One little boy who had managed to get hold of a double page from *Paris Match* made off with his prey like a monkey thrown a peanut in the Vincenne Zoo. By way of thanks the Russians filled the black sailor's bucket with cigarettes, small change and postcards covered with addresses.

The sight of this ship, an ambassador for French elegance and good taste, made our wives' mouths water. After thirty days of tourism in the raw, it was a joy for them to find themselves back in an atmosphere where, as Aliette put it, 'well-being and superfluity were taken for granted', for a few hours. As soon as he spotted the roof of our French car, the captain dispatched one of his officers to us. We were invited

to dine on board. Naturally we insisted on Slava and Vera accompanying us. But in our ignorance of Soviet regulations we created an incident with the police on guard at the foot of the boarding steps. It was in fact forbidden for Soviet citizens to climb aboard any foreign ship in case they took the opportunity to flee their country. '*Niet, niet* and *niet!*' the policemen repeated, barring our Soviet companions access to the ship.

'Go and get a pack of Marlborough out of the motor,' I said to Jean-Pierre.

Discreetly camouflaged in a plastic bag, the gift immediately unblocked the situation. We mounted the steps all together.

For Slava and Vera it was like stepping into a different world. Although by virtue of the journalist's profession and Party cards, they were somewhat privileged bourgeois Russians, I watched them discover the opulence of a five star Western liner with ill-disguised astonishment.

The captain and officers as well as the VIPs on board, listened with obvious curiosity to the account of our fluctuating fortunes on the roads through Soviet 'terra incognita'. The episode of our arrest among the radar and anti-aircraft guns aroused a more than admiring interest.

The champagne flowed abundantly over this convivial gathering. Then a dazzling dinner enabled us to initiate Slava and Vera to the delights of foie gras, one dish that their country's Sixth Agricultural Plan had not yet envisaged providing for their compatriots. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Aliette and Annie. To say they had reached the higher levels of beatitude would be to seriously underestimate their state. I was apprehensive about what might follow: would they ever want to get off this magic ship?

Won over by the general euphoria, dear Slava agreed to sing some of the deeply moving Russian ballads which the ship's musicians were quick to accompany. Those were blessed moments, a wonderful parenthesis in a fascinating but sometimes uncomfortable journey. Thank you, beautiful and generous *Marseillaise*!

Moscow ladies bathing! An orgy of pale flesh and spare tyres that amazed our wives. The potatoes, sausages, cabbage and black bread had taken their toll on the bodies sunbathing determinedly on the sand and shingle of that magnificent Russian Riviera. Here there were no bikinis like in Saint-Tropez, only ample two pieces enveloping generous figures

with difficulty, so Aliette and Annie's swimwear made in France caused a sensation. On the beach at Gurzuff enthusiastic women bathers offered their ear-rings and bracelets in exchange for bikini bottoms and tops they would never be able to wear because of their portliness.

On the shingle beach at Sotchi human fauna worthy of a Fellini film was packed together in staggering promiscuity. There the Soviets, ordinarily so timid and reserved, were extraordinarily immodest. Enormous matrons undressed and dressed again in full view of everyone without apparently offending anyone. Pink overalls became bathrobes, and underpants and reinforced bras often served as swim wear. Horizontal beneath a leaden sun, figures without figures browned gently in a confusion of sandals, towels and underwear. Under an umbrella imported from China (the latest in chic), a couple whose whitish limbs were in the throes of turning scarlet dozed as they read a *Pravda* which arrived here several days late.

In the clear water where hordes of delightful children were splashing about, an elderly gentleman was floating on his back. On his nose he had a piece of cardboard as protection against the sun's rays, on his eyes were dark glasses and on his forehead was a straw hat with a red band. Beside him, her hair covered with a large handkerchief, a muscular

lady grimaced as she slowly adjusted to the temperature of the water. Having sprinkled herself cautiously for a good ten minutes, she finally immersed herself up to her shoulders. When she stood up again her bosoms escaped the clutch of her bra and flopped onto her stomach. Without the slightest embarrassment, she took hold of each of her breasts and deposited them back in their place. Then she set about delicately massaging the rolls of flesh on her buttocks and stomach.

Every half hour a small green biplane flew low over the beach. It was making sure that no vessel went further than one nautical mile from the shore. As for the pleasure boats that frequently passed along the length of the beach, they did not have enough fuel to offer freedom to any passengers with their sights set on Turkey.

I stretched out next to a gentleman in a white straw hat. The man turned to me. We chatted in Russian. By then I knew enough vocabulary to count up to a million and conduct proper little interviews. I learned that he worked at the Ministry for Culture and that his holiday in Sotchi had cost him a whole month's salary. He was a communist but not a Party member.

'And you, who are you?' he asked me.

'I am a capitalist!'

The man laughed, tossed a pebble with a sort of amused disdain and said:

'*Niet!*'

When I told him I was a journalist, he added:

'*Niet*, a journalist is not a capitalist!'

Then the man showed me his sunglasses and asked me what I thought of them. They had white galalith frames.

'They cost twenty-five roubles,' he declared proudly, 'because they're from Czechoslovakia.'

Stepping over the bodies, picking my way between bellies and buttocks, I filled my eyes with the thousand spectacles of the Khrushchevian nomenclature on holiday. Suddenly, however, a young man in his underpants intercepted me and narrowly missed tipping me into the water as he tried to snatch my camera. I pushed him roughly away but he latched on and tried desperately to grab my Leica. A crowd promptly gathered and the stranger began to shower me with abuse. Like a trail of gunpowder, news of the incident ran the length of the beach and Slava, panic-stricken, came running. The man shouted that I was choosing to photograph only the

ugliest people, that it was a disgrace, that he was only a simple Soviet citizen but that he could not tolerate that.

The crowd of bathers soon attracted the attention of a policeman. I feared the worst. But before even knowing the reasons for the altercation, the representative of law and order addressed the plaintiff in a tone that permitted no response:

'This tovarich is a foreigner and our guest,' he shouted at him putting a protective arm round me. 'We should have the greatest respect for him!'

The boy blushed and stammered. Other onlookers blamed him harshly whilst smiling sympathetically at me as if to say: 'Excuse our fellow countryman's behaviour.' A big bald fellow who spoke a little French even said clearly:

'Monsieur, I beg you to do whatever you want!'

A young girl explained with a smile, half by gestures and half in Russian that I should not conclude from my encounter with this fanatic that all Russians were hot-headed. I reassured her. Really these people pushed the spirit of hospitality to its highest limits. The infinitely kind reaction of all those holiday-makers came as a pleasant surprise. In France, in the event of a similar incident, would ours be as sound?

A few kilometres further on, on the beach at Misore, we nearly made our fortune. Aliette and Annie met a rather pretty young Georgian girl. She was twenty years old and had quite a reasonable figure. She was adamant that she wanted to buy some of their dresses. When we got back to our hotel Jean-Pierre and I found our rooms had been turned into a fashion fitting room. Despite our wives' determined efforts, however, every dress was at least twenty centimetres too small in the waist for their Russian friend. She was desperately disappointed. She had dreamed only of dressing 'like they do in Paris'. To console her we gave her a make-up lesson. Jean-Pierre taught her how to put mascara on her eye lashes and Aliette how to put her blond plaits into a bun like the models on the cover of *Elle*. I, for my part, showed her how to paint her lips delicately with a tiny brush, an implement she found fascinating.

We travelled from Yalta to the Caucasus by boat. A four-day cruise from which our Marly and Slava's car also benefited, well sheltered in the hold. Our ship was certainly not the *Marseillaise* but it was the jewel of the Soviet Black Sea passenger fleet. Like the make of our Russian companions'

car it was called *Pobieda* which means 'Victory'. The Russians were crazy about the expression. Throughout the four years of suffering and horror the Nazis inflicted on them that word 'victory' had been a refrain and emblem of their hope.

Most Western ships have only two classes of passenger; there were no less than four on the socialist *Pobieda*, and it was of course in first class cabins that our Intourist guardian angels in Moscow had placed us. We decided to celebrate this consideration as soon as we had weighed anchor by drinking their health with a bottle of excellent Caucasian champagne. Ordering champagne on this Soviet ship, however, immediately proved as complicated an adventure as wresting ourselves from the clutches of the military police in rural Ukraine. I surveyed the three call buttons located above our couchette. In principle they linked up to the maitre d'hotel in the restaurant, our cabin boy and the cleaning lady. Full of expectation, I pressed the first. Twenty minutes elapsed without anyone appearing.

'Try the second bell!' Aliette was growing impatient.

Another half an hour went by and still there was no response. I leant several times on the third button. To no avail. Furious, I rang the bells for the cleaning lady, the maitre d'hotel and the cabin boy all at once. One hour later we at last heard the sound of footsteps in the passageway. The

door to the cabin burst open. A buxom matron dressed in overalls, looking very angry, questioned us unceremoniously.

'What do you want?'

In the absence of Slava and Vera who had gone up to sunbathe on the deck, I mustered all my knowledge of Russian:

'*Champagne paja ousté, dievuchka, ochin hallodné champagne*,' I said, sounding my words out carefully. (Champagne please, Miss, champagne that has been well chilled.)'

'*Kak champagne?*' she answered, shrugging her shoulders. '(What do you mean champagne?")

'*Da, champagne.* (Yes, champagne.)'

'*Niponimayo*,' she exclaimed. (I don't understand what you want.)

'*Poutchimou?* (Why?)' intervened Aliette showing off her small knowledge of Russian in her turn.

'*Poutchimou, poutchimou?* (Why, why?)' persisted the employee.

It was clear that the conversation had reached an impasse and would have to be resumed on a different basis.

'*Dievuchka, paja ousté, odine* – for the following word I mimed the shape of a bottle and imitated bubbles bursting from the neck – *champagne sitchias sitchias.* (If you please, Miss, a bottle of champagne at once, at once.)

All at once our visitor's frown dissolved. She even started to laugh. We all believed she had at last understood.

'*Kharocho! Odine moment!* (Okay, wait a moment)' she called out to us before disappearing.

Phew!

Half an hour later, there she was back again with three bottles on a tray. There were certainly bubbles issuing from their necks but not as a result of fermentation of the famous Caucasian grapes. They were three tepid bottles of Narzan, Soviet mineral water. We gave up the cause and sipped it out of tooth glasses in our luxury cabin.

Forming the frontier between Europe and Asia, the Caucasus mountain chain soon loomed into the sky with its snow-capped peaks higher than Mont Blanc.

Before unloading the Marly and Slava's car with all the

meticulous care of a goldsmith, the *Pobieda*'s sailors respectfully washed them in running water. We were ready to head into the mountains on a magnificent route edged by precipices from which the thunderous echo of torrents rose to reach us.

At the market in the village of Afon we bought apples from some old women sunning themselves in front of their pitiful display. Further on, coach loads of tourists machine gunned us with their clicking camera whilst giving us a long ovation. This was wild, uninhabited, brightly coloured terrain. Sometimes the shadow of a horseman galloping on his small black horse would slip across a rock. The Caucasus is home to the Abhakzes, Tcherkesses, Georgians, Svans and Khevsours. Armed with long curved sabres, swathed in goat hair capes, warriors from these proud tribes had been lauded by poets since time immemorial. The great October Revolution seemed to have made no difference at all to their traditional independence.

We left the main road to embark on a difficult track leading to the higher slopes, and found ourselves at the entrance to a strange village which looked like a slum with its wooden huts, half-naked kids, mended washing drying between the trees, and calves, cows, pigs and chickens wandering about all over the place. Slava assured us that the

occupants of this village were holidaymakers. We had difficulty in believing it but the presence of several motorcars parked under the wooden porch roofs attached to some of the huts suggested he was right.

Further on, on a pebbly shelf between two torrents, at the foot of slopes covered with gigantic ancient conifers, we found a superb site to put up our tent. We were in the heart of the Caucasus, several leagues from the nearest village and six thousand kilometres from Paris, Rome or Madrid. It was an historic occasion. Never before had a foreigner pitched tent in the Soviet Union. Never before had a foreigner even spent a night in the Soviet Union without submitting his passport to the relevant police authority. Yes, this was a real first, guaranteed to be talked about for generations! Before settling in we attached our small tricolour pennant to the branch of a pine tree. In front of Slava and Vera, who were very impressed, we saluted our piece of cloth fluttering in the breeze of the Soviet Caucasus with a few seconds' silence. Suddenly the Iron Curtain, the Cold War, the people's revolution, the red terror and the gulags seemed to us like the inventions of some disaster movie. Jean-Pierre lit a large wood fire on which he prepared macaroni *alla carbonara*, a dish he had down to a fine art. Aliette knelt down beside the torrent to do a little washing. Annie put some tins of *foie gras* to chill in the icy water coming down from the

mountains. Slava, bare-chested, began singing old Russian melodies in his deep voice as he arranged a comfortable spot for our dinner. As for Vera, she seemed mesmerised by the supple substance our dishes were made out of. Plastic was a material that Khrushchev's Russia did not yet manufacture. After trying in vain to catch a trout with a rod and line, I pitched our tent, set up a shower system at the edge of the torrent and inflated the air mattresses on which we would have a sumptuous sunbathe by way of aperitif. We were in a state of euphoria.

Sadly our solitude was of short duration. The Caucasian telegraph was as fiendish as the bush telegraph: it had already spread news of an extraordinary car going by, all over the area. 'Delegations' of holidaymakers and mountain people converged on us from all directions. We were swamped in demonstrations of friendship. People protested that it was not right to receive such distinguished guests under canvas; they admired the French flag at the top of the pine tree; they gave us fruit, honey, some superb trout and even a small salmon. We thanked them, handing out Eiffel towers. It was then that a fat, bearded Georgian detached himself from a group. He placed his heavy hands on my shoulders.

'You are my brother until death!' he launched at me before crushing my mouth with a passionate kiss.

I staggered under his embrace but Slava reassured me.

'Dominique, be glad, this man has just given you the most ancient token of Georgian friendship.'

Next day we paid the price for so exuberant a show of affection. The Marly creaked, groaned and threatened to fall to pieces on the dreadful road that the author of the kiss had advised us to take back down to the coast. In six hours we did a painful thirty kilometres. We stopped in one village at the foot of a grandiose statue of Stalin. The inhabitants were quick to encircle the car, especially the men with their handsome, dark, moustachioed faces that already prefigured the East. I pointed at Stalin.

'What a great man!' I said in a Russian of which I was rather proud.

'Ah yes, what a great man!' several villagers hurriedly confirmed.

'And Khrushchev?'

My question immediately caused all their faces to freeze into the same grimace of disdain. One mouth spat.

'*Khrushchev niet karocho!*' someone called out.

I did not persist.

Our perilous descent to the coast, however, made us think of the dear First Secretary who had warned us in Moscow about his country's roads. At any moment stretches of water would oblige us to stop and sound how deep they were with a shovel. Sometimes a rock slide would force us to skirt the extreme edge of a ravine the depth of which was lost in the halo of our headlights. But Khrushchev had been wrong with his gloomy prediction: our wives were still not talking about divorce. On the contrary they displayed amazing stoicism, paddling about in the mud as often as necessary. We forded two rivers then entered a third much wider one, very slowly to avoid flooding the engine. Panic-stricken cries pierced the night. Aliette and Annie had just realised that an eddy of blackish water had surged into the cabin. Jean-Pierre jumped into the water to film this sorry ship-wreck. Hardly touching the accelerator, I tried at all costs to keep us moving forwards. The tyres skidded on stones, were obstructed, spun and embedded themselves in the mud. The inevitable happened swiftly: the engine coughed, spluttered and died.

In the middle of that Georgian torrent our beautiful motorcar was reduced to a wreck. Wading up to our thighs,

we were seized by a brief moment of discouragement. Most of our personal effects were soaked. While Aliette and Annie assessed the extent of the damage by torchlight, I plunged up to my shoulders in the icy water to try and push away the stones blocking our tyres. Waste of effort. In any case the engine obstinately refused to start. But as luck would have it socialism's good fairies were at hand. Two white headlights suddenly pierced the darkness. It was a jeep. Surprise! The passenger spoke French. She had never been to France but could recognise all the sites and monuments on the map of Paris which we unfolded at her request on the bonnet of her jeep. Curious to know where we lived, she walked her fingers from streets to avenues as far as our respective homes. Surreal! In the meantime her driver, a young engineer from Tiflis whom the sorry position of our car seemed seriously to worry, fastened a cable to it and attempted to get us out of the water with the help of his vehicle. Hurrah! In ten minutes we were on the other bank. Hurrah again: the engine condescended to start at the first turn of the key.

Shivering, soaked to the bone, as exhausted as if we had just crossed the Atlantic in a raft, late in the night we made our conspiratorial entrance into Gori, the legendary small town that had witnessed the birth seventy-seven years previously, of one of the most terrible tyrants humanity had

ever engendered, Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, alias Stalin, the 'man of steel'. The frightening accusations made less than five months earlier by Khrushchev against a child of this locality had changed nothing here. Official guides were eager to take us to the small brick built house where he had been born, conserved like treasure in a monumental marble case guarded by two armed sentinels. A colossal full-length statue of the dictator dominated the huge square in front of the monument. Stalin's family's little house had been turned into a museum in which were piously preserved samples of all the pictures official art had used to promote his popularity, as well as objects that had belonged to him, photographs taken at different stages in his life, false papers he had used clandestinely, books he had read, letters he had written. In the modest white-washed room where he had been born nothing, it seemed, had changed. On the left a wooden bed; in the middle a table covered with a coarse cloth; to the right on a small sideboard, a samovar, a clay water jug and his mother's oval mirror.

Having feasted our eyes at length on the spectacle of these relics, we went to have dinner in the pilgrims' caravanserai built at the heart of this high place of Russian history. During the meal, a souvenir vendor laid out on our table reproductions of items kept in the museum. The other

guests in the restaurant came rushing over. In a matter of minutes the vendor had exhausted his stock of pipes, photos of the great man at every age, false papers and other objects of cult, reminders that here had been born the son of a poor shoe-maker, who had become one of History's most bloodthirsty dictators.

8

THE HORRIBLE MASSACRE THAT CAUSED SEVEN MILLION DEATHS ON THE STREETS OF STALINIST TIFLIS

There we were at Tiflis. Our use of the name 'Tiflis' to denote the capital of Georgia upset Slava. Since the revolution, he explained to us, you had to say 'Tbilissi', the Russian name derived from the Georgian *tbili* meaning 'hot'. According to legend it was on discovering a hot spring whilst out hunting that the Georgian king, Vakhtang Gorgosal decided to found his capital there. That was in the sixth century. Never since then had hot water ceased to surge from the entrails of Tbilissi.

Over the centuries the town had known the tormented history of all cities whose riches and beauty are equalled only by the greed they inspire. Successively pillaged by Tamerlan, subjugated by the Persians and coveted by the Turks, in February 1921 Tiflis became the capital of the Soviet

republic of Georgia. The introduction of hard-line socialism and the disappearance of private ownership gradually stripped the town of its oriental picturesqueness. It was farewell to the bazaars, souks, coppersmiths, weavers, goldsmiths and armourers. Farewell to the fierce horsemen in their richly coloured clothing. Red Tiflis melted into the socialist mould but without losing its charm altogether.

This great city clinging to the first slopes of the Caucasus was not completely unknown to Jean-Pierre and me. Less than five months earlier it had welcomed the Auriols and their guests ourselves included, with great pomp. A few hours after we had left, the serious unrest had broken out which Match, along with all the rest of the Western press, had picked up on when it published our pictures of the French president and his wife in Tiflis that morning. The rioting had begun with a student demonstration in support of Stalin. Thousands of young people had gone through the town brandishing placards accusing Khrushchev of having wanted ignominiously to bring down the country's idol in his speech at the 20th Party Congress. They clashed violently with the security forces. The First Secretary had shown no reservations about rushing to Moscow to personally drown in a blood bath any impulse Stalinist Georgia might have to revolt against central power. The word had since gone round that

there had been seven thousand deaths. For several weeks the city and its surroundings had been cut off from the world.

Jean-Pierre and I still harboured the memory of the warm hospitality the President of the Supreme Soviet of Georgia had offered the Auriols, so immediately on our arrival we made for the office of the Georgian capital's central figure. Fifty-four-year-old Victor Kupratzé's thick grey curly hair and blue eyes were well known to students in particular because in addition to his political function, this renowned mathematician was also rector of the local university. He received us on the day the academic year started. In the antechamber to his vast office decorated with a portrait of Stalin in the prime of his life, a number of students' parents were waiting. Like so many of the world's universities, Tiflis' was too small to quench the thirst for knowledge and education of all the local youth. Parents had to submit themselves to rigorous procedures to have their children inscribed. That day the whole town was decorated with red banners wishing the primary and secondary schoolchildren and the students a happy scholastic year.

Our host's excellent English made our reunion easy. With three telephone calls he arranged for a family dinner in our honour at his dacha, his country residence situated in the mountains about twenty kilometres from Tiflis. To

get there he decided to abandon his enormous official black Zim and climbed into the Marly which, needless to say, had never been so favoured! It was an honour indeed to transport the president of a Soviet republic and rector of the capital's university into the bargain!

A pretty little house in half wood and half stone, the venerable Georgian's dacha provided a splendid view of the town of Tiflis. Four people were waiting for us on the terrace: Mrs Kupratzé, a smiling woman dressed in a long floral dress; her daughter Olga, a charming girl of seventeen with fine features accentuated by beautiful green eyes; an elderly but very exuberant half Russian and half Hungarian lady, a former ballet teacher in Budapest, whom the Kupratzés called 'aunt'; and finally Sacha, the rector's closest friend, a well-padded man with a mischievous look who taught seismology at the university of Tiflis.

The main room was not very large. Its furnishings seemed modest to us given the importance of our host: a sofa, two armchairs, a few chairs and a cheap sideboard. From the ceiling hung the lamp with its pomponned shade indispensable to any Soviet interior. In one corner gleamed an enamelled cupboard: the refrigerator. But that evening the room was enriched by a table covered with a breathtaking abundance of food and drink. Round the plates, between

the glasses and the bottles of wine, vodka, mineral water and cognac had been placed small hors-d'oeuvres dishes full of caviar, cheese, salmon, crudités, glazed sturgeon and blinis.

As soon as the first glasses of vodka and cognac had been downed in one as tradition ordained, the atmosphere became intensely warm: we clinked glasses to Franco-Georgian friendship, to peace, to love... we embraced and we sang while dish succeeded dish on our plates, each more exquisite than the previous: a bouillon with Caucasian herbs (a sort of chicken soup), stuffed aubergines and tomatoes, chicken on a spit, pig's trotters, grilled beef, coffee ice cream, fruits, watermelon, all kinds of sweetmeats... Then, while the big Dniepr tape recorder played an American jazz tune, white and pink Georgian champagne corks popped in all directions. Having toasted all the world's wine-growers, Victor (by now we were all calling each other by our forenames) asked Aliette up for a frenzied boogie, soon caught up with by Jean-Pierre who, thinking he was in some temple to Parisian swing, was twirling the mistress of the house about in all directions. As for the professor of seismology, he had set his cap at the pretty Annie whom he was leading cheek to cheek to a slow and amorous rhythm.

I took advantage of these antics to go out onto the terrace and contemplate the lights of Tiflis in the warm summer's

evening. Could a massacre really have occurred on the previous 8 March in this peaceful basin from which a soft murmuring was now rising? As my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, I imagined flames spurting from submachine guns. On the previous day we had happened to run into a lady who spoke English with a surprising Oxford accent because she had had an English nanny when she was a child. Referring to the events of March we asked her:

'It was very serious wasn't it?'

Turning suddenly very pale she replied:

'How did you know about that? Was it mentioned in your newspapers then? I can't talk about it to you...It was horrible!'

The rector joined me on the terrace. I tried to make him talk.

'Nothing happened,' he assured me, meeting my gaze with a frank and honest look, 'just a students' demonstration that a few villains wanted to exploit...I can assure you...it was nothing really.'

We were happy to lose ourselves in the narrow streets of Georgia's capital where, as elsewhere, the Marly's appearance provoked passionate curiosity. But to our surprise mingled with concern, here plain clothed policemen followed us like shadows and brutally pushed back anyone wanting to get too close to the car.

In the course of our wanderings we chased an ambulance. It led us straight into the courtyard of an old, grey stone building, the town's number 1 hospital. There we hoped to find the fourth hero of our series of reports on Khrushchev's people, a surgeon. Fortune smiled on us. That September morning, the surgical department had just admitted a little boy at death's door. He was suffering from a bowel obstruction complicated by peritonitis. Only an immediate operation could save him. To the stupefaction of Slava, who was taken aback by our journalistic audacity, we managed to slip on gowns and masks and sneak into the operating theatre. With a rapid, precise movement a surgeon was applying his scalpel to the child's enflamed stomach.

Georgi Varlamovich Mossechvili, with his short moustache, wide forehead and receding hairline, was a very young surgeon of thirty-two. Far from incurring his displeasure, our unannounced appearance in his operating theatre seemed to delight him. He at once led us out into

the corridor to introduce his wife Olga, a thirty year old doctor in the same hospital. She was a lovely, well-rounded woman with thick red hair and a little turned up nose. Both agreed readily to receive us in their home.

No 5 Georgitzé Street was an old, grey brick house dating from before the revolution. It was a spacious, comfortable universe over which presided two little devils called Zuricho, seven, and Zaga, three; a universe exuding, if not opulence, at least a certain comfort. Among its 1920s Barbès style furnishings we detected signs of wealth still rare in Khrushchev's Russia, such as a large refrigerator and a washing machine. Georgi also possessed a powerful radio set with which he could pick up Paris, London, Madrid and Rome – 'except when those stations are scrambled!' he confided. Our wives' curiosity was drawn to a curtain that concealed a kind of alcove at the far end of the apartment. There they found a mattress. Olga explained that that was where the *dievuchka* slept. Yes, the Mossechvilis actually employed a home help. For one hundred and fifty roubles a month plus food and lodging they had no qualms about perpetuating the 'exploitation of man by man' we had believed abolished for ever in the workers' paradise. Slava, who never missed an opportunity to extol the virtues of the Soviet system to us, told us the dievuchka was there 'entirely

of her own accord' and that her working conditions were the same as she would find in a factory.

After proudly showing us his library where Balzac, Flaubert and Victor Hugo lived alongside Lenin, Gorki and numerous medical works, our surgeon friend agreed, through his papirossi smoke, to speak to us about his past. He had been born in that house and brought into the world by his own father, Varlam Pavlovich, a peasant's son who had become a doctor during the last tsar's reign. As an adolescent he had felt drawn to sciences. At first he had wanted to be a chemist but had, one day, read a news item. In it the author told the story of a psychiatrist who patiently helped a woman who had gone mad on the death of her child back to sanity. It had come as a jolt to him. Two years later he began his medical studies. One day a friend took him into an operating theatre where the surgeon proceeded to remove a kidney. It was a very serious operation and made all the more of an impression because it was not possible to put the patient to sleep. Deeply moved behind his white mask, Georgi followed the progress of the operation with passionate interest. The patient died but Georgi decided to become a surgeon.

He had been finishing his fourth year of studies when, one fine summer's lunchtime, Molotov's voice resounded from the family radio set. Stalin's Commissar of Foreign

Affairs was announcing that the Nazis had just invaded the country. Thirteen months later, when he was serving in a Caucasian regiment caught in German artillery fire, a shell exploded and shrapnel struck down a soldier next to him. Entering close to the heart the piece of shrapnel tore into the pericardium and the pleura. The air the poor man breathed went directly through the wound while his heart beat, exposed. The regimental infirmary had no catgut to suture the wound. Georgi was reduced to using thread brought by a local man, which he sterilised in water boiled up in a mess-tin. Miraculously the wounded man survived.

The Crimea, the Ukraine, Moldavia... the euphoria of the Red Army's advance had been overshadowed for a while by a dispatch announcing the death of his father... the crossing of the Danube, the cupolas of Galatzi...Georgi Mossechvili entered Romania on 28th August 1944. This was the first time he had set foot on foreign soil. For twenty-five years the frontiers of his country - guarded by soldiers in NKVD green caps - had been hermetically sealed. Soon the Romanian and German forces capitulated. One day, thirty-two kilometres from Vienna, his regiment joined up with an American unit. All the delirium of victory had broken out. Throughout the night the small Austrian town of Zwettl had resounded to the fraternisation of the Red Army soldiers with Uncle Sam's GIs.

Four years later Georgi had returned home in a captain's uniform. His tunic sported the order of the Red Star, medals for bravery, for the defence of the Caucasus and for victory over Germany. On the station platform a young woman was waiting for him. He embraced her timidly. It was Olga. They had loved each other ever since the evening they first met in 1939. On 8 September 1947 they married.

Demobbed, a graduate and married, Georgi Mossechvili could look forward with optimism to the 'singing tomorrows' Stalin was drumming into the victorious Russian people. But he was missing one very important string to his bow, the absence of which he had had cause to regret at the front: politically Georgi was an 'outcaste'. So he joined the Party[1]. He had done so, he insisted, not out of ambition but because he believed communism could resolve his country's political and economic problems – and some day those of the whole world.

At times our conversation took on a passionate note that revealed the thinking of an open and profoundly sincere man.

'Science has proved there is no God,' he asserted with touching conviction, 'all beings are born, live and die, and life is just a form of existence of matter.'

After a pause he added:

'My aim is through my work to create better conditions for the people of my time and for generations to come.'

Like all members of the Soviet medical body, Georgi Mossechvili was impregnated with Pavlov's dogma, which Stalinist medicine had made its official doctrine and which prescribed studying all human organic phenomena in relation to their environment.

'Well,' explained Georgi, 'it is in the communist environment that man achieves maximum happiness whereas the living conditions in the capitalist milieu render him unfit for such happiness.'

The Mossechvilis' happiness would be complete when they could purchase for two thousand roubles a television set to pick up programmes broadcast for a few hours a week by a great iron structure the Georgians nicknamed 'the Tiflis Eiffel Tower.'

[1] *Not everyone who wished to could join the Party. Out of two hundred million Soviet people, only six million were Party members in 1956, the Party being a sort of club for which you had to be put forward by two sponsors and to which you were admitted for one year's trial period before being finally approved. In the course of our journey we met many who desperately wanted to join the Party but who had no chance of succeeding.*

9

A GULAG ESCAPEE'S INCREDIBLE CONFESSION

No, comrade Khrushchev, it was not our wives who would demand a divorce. It was our car. Because in the end the hidden dangers of the roads your Intourist bureaucrats made us take would wreck it. Worst of all, however, was the infernal, stinking brew your petrol stations persisted in passing off as fuel. There was no avoiding the fatal consequences. In vain we struggled to filter the fluid provided through the finest sieve - the crush hat my grandfather wore to his wedding, for instance. Your petrol, comrade Khrushchev, was quite simply unfit for consumption by a modern Western engine. The symphonic resonance of our V eight cylinders kept on dissolving into a shameful backfiring. Deprived of much of their power, they pulled us along at the speed of the gypsy caravans we met along the way.

Ten or twenty times a day we had to stop and clean the

carburettor and burst our lungs blowing into the jets. One morning as we were coming into Sukhumi, a charming seaside resort on the Black Sea reserved exclusively for nomenklatura dignitaries, the powerful engine expired with a series of splutters. What were we to do three thousand kilometres from the nearest Simca dealer, in a country where there were no representatives for foreign makes and no garages for private cars? In Slava's opinion the only solution was to drive the unfortunate invalid to the large local engine hospital, as it happened, the municipal bus depot where, he assured us, we would find 'all the knowhow of Soviet technicians and the precision of their machines' for our patient.

The technicians in question were both named after characters from Tolstoy: Vladimir Alexandrovich and Ivan Nicolaïevich. At the entrance to their workshop, under a huge banner proclaiming 'ONWARDS TO COMMUNISM', was an honours board. I was reassured to find pictures of Vladimir and Ivan under the effigies of Karl Marx, Lenin and Stalin. The Marly seemed to have fallen into capable hands! All the more so for the fact that the manager of the depot and his first engineer, both in suits and ties, immediately came running to the rescue of their overalled mechanics. After a thorough auscultation of the engine a long consultation was held. The conclusion was somewhat frightening: the cylinder head would have to be dismantled

in order to grind the sixteen valves and reset their tappet clearances. These Russians had never laid hands on a foreign engine. Would they be capable of that kind of surgery? Lost in the depths of the USSR, I suddenly discovered the universal nature of mechanics. Without a word, moving like automata, Vladimir and Ivan began to take the engine to bits. Eight hours later, at midnight when the accents of the Soviet national anthem blared from the workshop's small radio, Vladimir and Ivan silently finished replacing the last bolt. The repair work was finished. Under the anxious gazes of the two drawn-faced stakhanovites, I installed myself at the wheel. My trembling fingers felt the icy metal of the ignition key. Vladimir and Ivan watched my hand as if it were about to launch a sputnik into space. They had worked so hard! I put an end to the suspense. The engine started up. But I was too used to its music not to pick up that half the instruments were missing from the orchestra. The two Russians' formidable work had been for nothing. Our eight cylinders had not been restored to life. I wiped away a tear of rage and turned off the ignition.

'We should call Boris,' Vladimir then suggested, admiring the little Eiffel Tower that Jean-Pierre had just given him to allay his disappointment.

'Boris? Who's Boris?'

'He's the engineer in charge of carburettors,' translated Slava, pleased to show that his country had a wealth of specialists.

The workshop clock showed one o'clock in the morning. Jean-Pierre was keen to know where such a specialist might be found at such an hour.

'No problem,' intervened Ivan. 'He's on duty at the other bus depot in town. I'll get onto him.'

That was how our last resort came to turn up: a big guy with glasses who seemed quite unthrown by our nocturnal SOS. He listened at length to the faltering sound of the engine, depressed the accelerator a few times and pronounced his diagnosis:

'The petrol isn't flowing through the carburettor properly. It must be blocked somewhere.'

'Doctor' Boris immediately set to work. One by on, he disconnected the various pipes and rods, then took out the carburettor much as a surgeon might remove a heart from a thorax to replace it. He deposited it carefully on the workbench, lifted the cover and took out the float. In less than a minute our poor car's vital organ found itself dismantled into a hundred minute pieces. I wondered anxiously how Boris would ever be able to put this metal

puzzle back together. Next he subjected every screw, every jet, every recess of the chamber and every petrol access to the fierce burst of a jet of compressed air. Then he reassembled the whole thing and put the carburettor back in its place. Before reconnecting the petrol feed pipe he took the precaution of installing a small supplementary filter to discourage the passage of impurities. Ignition on. A unanimous and triumphant roar issued from the eight cylinders. I could not believe my ears. I clutched our saviour in my arms while Jean-Pierre opened a bottle of vodka. The Marly was saved. The night ended with a hundred kilometre an hour drive through deserted streets. Rounding bends on two wheels, with Grand Prix style acceleration, I shamelessly woke the thousands of holidaymakers in the sleeping resort. The beautiful dream could continue.

The beautiful dream did indeed continue when a crowd of several hundred curious people engulfed the car at Sukhumi beach. Suddenly a curly-haired man of about thirty wove his way through the multitude. When he got as far as the radio aerial, I saw him take our tricolour pennant in his hands, unfurl it respectfully, then bring it to his lips and kiss it.

Jean-Pierre managed to film this extraordinary scene played out in everyone's view.

'I really must speak to you,' the stranger whispered to us, putting his head inside the car. He pronounced the sentence in French with a surprising southern accent. 'I'll come to your hotel at nine this evening. Unless the police arrest me in the meantime!'

At nine o'clock precisely there was a knock at the door. To mark the occasion Aliette had got out the bottle of pastis we had lugged with us for six thousand kilometres. Before sitting down the visitor thoroughly inspected every little nook in the room, moved the furniture, unhooked the pictures, followed the wires that ran along the wood panelling and examined the telephone receiver and any suspect objects. His mind at last at ease, he settled himself in an armchair and lit a cigarette. I served him a stiff pastis while Jean-Pierre set our tape recorder running. Our minds were scarcely at ease. Ever since our adventure in the military camp on the outskirts of Kiev, the KGB must have had their eye on us. We might well be dealing with a provocateur.

'My name is Georges Manoukian,' the visitor began calmly. 'I used to be a cobbler in Marseille. My parents are Armenian but I am French.' From his shirt pocket he took out a piece of card. 'Look: "République française". That's

my identity card.' He moved closer to the microphone. 'Mum, I can't tell you who I am but you will no doubt recognise my voice. This is your son speaking. Remember, I owe you the two thousand francs you lent me at the casino in Aix on New Year's Eve 1945. Mum, I beg you: go and see all our friends and relatives in the rue des Cordonniers[1] and tell them never to do the damned fool thing I did by coming to this country.'

'And you, why did you do this "damned fool thing"?' asked Jean-Pierre opportunely.

The Armenian responded, smiling with all his gold teeth:

'We were young, the ship was great. We told ourselves we'd try a spell here and if we didn't like it we'd go back. Six thousand of us thought the same thing. Soviet propaganda, parents encouraging us to come, the taste for adventure...When we got to Batoum they packed us into cattle trucks. They had promised us a job, good wages, a house, a car, the full works. In fact we found ourselves in a hell-hole. You know what? You shouldn't say, "Go to hell!" It should be, "Go to the Soviet Union!" I had to steal to eat. Until the day came when I couldn't take any more and I decided to escape. One night I set off for Turkey carrying a bag on my back with twelve cats in it. When I got to the frontier and the guard dogs picked up my scent and barked,

I let out the cats. The dogs took off after the cats and I took the opportunity to jump in the river. Unfortunately I was spotted by a lookout and recaptured. They gave me a train journey in a barred carriage to the Verkhoïansk camp, a corner of Siberia that passes for the iciest place on earth. I was condemned to ten years' penal servitude. To shorten my sentence I asked to be part of the unit assigned to emptying the camp's cesspits. The work was so revolting that every day of detention counted for three. Because the stench clung to us we were shut in a barrack apart. I stayed there for three years. On my return to Soviet Armenia friends helped me to buy an identity card on which there was no mention of my stay at the gulag. Since then I've been living off small jobs here and there in the hope of being allowed to return to France.'

Return to France! We were to discover that there were over six thousand Armenians of French origin like Georges Manoukian, desperately pursuing this dream. We were to come across dozens of them asking us to intervene in their favour. Theirs was a tragic predicament. The diplomats we consulted when we got back to Moscow were adamant: the Soviets would never allow such fanatical enemies out of their 'socialist paradise'.

Two weeks later as we were passing through Sukhumi

again, a woman with her face half-hidden in the folds of a shawl discreetly approached our car. In a few words murmured in English she gave us to understand that the police had arrested Georges Manoukian as soon as we had left the town. The news made our blood run cold.

How could this country be so cruel when we were so constantly being given evidence of the generosity of its people? On the steps to our hotel Aliette was accosted by an adolescent with bushy hair who handed her a small book. On the flyleaf he had inscribed these words: 'For Madame Lapierre. Permit me to offer you this humble gift as a token of my deepest respect. Sukhumi, 10 September 1956. Boris.'

It was the French text book the young man used to teach our language to the small schoolchildren of Abkhazie, the Soviet republic through which we had been travelling for a few days. The eighth lesson on page 37 showed a picture of Stalin accompanied by a dictation passage entitled: 'Marxist-Leninism, our compass.' There followed a hotchpotch of extracts from speeches by the French Communist Party leader, Maurice Thorez whose gibberish seemed to us very unlikely to enlighten the youth of Abkhazie about the true realities of France in the mid-nineteen fifties.

'Our French Communist Party possesses an incomparable compass, which enables it to set itself surely on the

working class route,' Thorez declared notably. 'This compass is the scientific doctrine of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, that is to say Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory. Lenin and Stalin have moved the theory of Marx and Engels on.

'The constitution of the USSR is the granite monument that guarantees the march to progress and happiness of the peoples of the Soviet Union,' the French communist leader almost promised. 'It gives all the workers of the world the certainty that their cause will triumph, communism will triumph.

'Our French Communist Party would not have been able to find the right way. It would not have been able to keep to it, if it had not first assimilated Marxist-Leninist theory.'

May your memory be forever blessed, First Secretary of the French Communist Party, for the sparkling clarity of this unforgettable message!

I never missed an opportunity to be alone with Slava. After all, one of the bonuses of our extraordinary journey was having a first hand insight into the mentality of the enigmatic

Russian people. Whenever I could I would abandon the cushioned capitalist comfort of the Marly to take the wheel of our companion's austere Pobieda and titillate his unwavering good humour with provocative questions.

'Slava, how is it that the hotels in the USSR are generally so disgustingly filthy?' I asked him one day point-blank.

'When they are dirty it is the fault of the person in charge,' he replied in similar sharp vein.

'But why does the person in charge not set his heart on making sure their establishment is clean?'

'Because they are bad at being in charge!'

'But why are they bad at being in charge?'

Slava shrugged his shoulders as an expression of his helplessness.

'Dominique, in every country there are people who do their job well and others who do theirs badly. In France too, I'm sure. The USSR is currently making a huge effort to develop its tourist potential. You have to understand that we started from scratch. In five, ten years we will have corrected all the mistakes and ironed out all the problems. You should come back then, Dominique.'

After a pause he went on with touching fervour:

'Our party is GREAT, Dominique. We have to have faith in it!'

'Slava, be realistic: you will never manage to iron out all the problems,' I said, firmly resolved to get away from these hackneyed expressions for once.

'But why not?' he asked, looking hurt.

'Because the person put in charge of a hotel or a roadside petrol station is never going to work quite like someone who owns his own business. By suppressing private ownership your system has killed individual initiative and the competitive spirit, and your entire arsenal of bonuses on merit and honours tables will never replace the satisfaction a businessman feels when he sees a return for his work because he has taken trouble over it.

'Look, Slava, how do you think your Soviet garage man is going to sell better petrol when there is only one sort? Why should he repaint the "prophylaxis station" he runs when it's the only one for hundreds of kilometres and cars will be obliged to stop at his pump anyway? Why should the hotel manager in Sukhumi put himself out when the hotel is the only one in the town approved by Intourist, it's always

full and he has no real reason to increase his clientele? It isn't so much a question of mistakes or problems but of the system, isn't it?

'My dear Slava if you had a choice between cruising the Black Sea in the *Marseillaise* or the *Pobieda* which ship would you take?'

My arguments did not appear to have the slightest impact. Our companion suddenly started talking like Nikita Khrushchev.

'Come back in ten years time, Dominique,' he began with conviction. 'In ten, fifteen or maybe twenty years time but definitely one day my country will have caught up with America's living standards!'

It was my turn to shrug my shoulders:

'What you're forgetting, Slava, is that in ten or twenty years time America's living standards will have improved so much that you will still be way behind. Russia will never catch up with America, Slava.'

Slava flashed me a sarcastic smile.

'Between now and then there will be some crisis in America, Dominique. With us crises are impossible.'

Knowing the damage I could do if my arguments were to shake his convictions, I put an end to our discussion. I had too much liking for this honest, idealistic guy. Better to leave him to the socialist happiness of his illusions.

We had the most memorable breakfast of our journey one morning in Krasnodar, a small town at the foot of the Caucasus. In the large neon-lit room of café No 6, opposite our hotel, we naturally caused quite a stir. Rare indeed were the strangers who passed through Krasnodar. The waitress who brought us bread and fried eggs informed us that if we wanted butter and jam with our bread we must go to café No 36. But at café No 36 unfortunately they did not serve fried eggs. In fact, by orders from above, all eggs allocated to that café were boiled... So it was that in Krasnador in order to have tea, bread, butter, jam and fried eggs for breakfast, one needed the perseverance and patience to go and consume them separately in different establishments.

The Marly, by contrast, was treated to a feast in that forgotten little town. Slava, whom we had given the thrill of continually shaking his compatriots out of their inertia to extract minor miracles from them, unearthed an unexpected

beverage for our motorcar: aircraft fuel provided by the man in charge of the local air base. I dared not imagine our valves and spark plugs' reaction to contact with a liquid more used to catapulting Migs through the sound barrier than propelling a bourgeois capitalist limousine. All too happy to erase the memory of the revolting fuel it had been consuming, however, our engine adapted itself perfectly to this exceptional treatment. We almost took off on the road leading in the direction of Gorki, the great industrial capital of Ural where we had a meeting with the last character to feature in our portrait gallery.

The long journey provided me with further exchanges with our companion.

'Slava, why do you never ask me any questions?' I said to him all of a sudden.

He hesitated for a moment.

'I think, Dominique, that we have two different conceptions of journalism. You, I have noticed several times, consider you have the right to know everything, that everyone's public and private life belongs to you...In Sotchi, for instance, you wanted to see Khrushchev, photograph him in his dacha, tell how he spent his holidays...Those things don't interest us. In the USSR, everyone has a right to a

private life. That is why, when I'm here on holiday, I don't feel the need to ask you questions. But if one day, I come to France, I shall ask as many questions as you! Even more than you!'

Slava laughed. I changed the subject and asked him:

'Slava, do Russians have mistresses?'

My friend assumed an air of surprise.

'No doubt,' he replied.

'For years the Soviets have advocated free love, haven't they?'

'Free love? What's "free love", Dominique?'

I had noticed that whenever he didn't want to answer a question he pretended not to understand.

'Love outside marriage, living together without being obliged to marry...'

Slava shrugged his shoulders and said with a hint of disdain.

'I've never heard of that.'

I insisted:

'Can a man take a woman who isn't his wife to a hotel?'

'No, certainly not!' He had second thoughts and added: 'He can invite her into his room until midnight. But after midnight no Soviet citizen can stay in a hotel unless he has submitted his passport to the management and officially hired a room.'

'But aren't there any small third or fourth class hotels where they turn a blind eye?'

'No, not even fifth class!'

'But what do prostitutes do?

'What?'

'Women who make a business out of love.'

Slava looked alarmed. Then dryly he said: 'Dominique, I've never in my life been with one of those women. Believe me.'

I reassured him: 'Slava, it is not the man I am addressing, but the journalist.'

And there I let it rest.

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[1] *Cobblers*
[2] *Street*

10

FACTORY WORKER IVAN GREGORIEVICH'S ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY THOUSAND CARS

The doors to central Asia! Our last leg before Moscow and our return to France had taken us to the banks of the mythical Volga, the river the Russians extol in song much as the Americans do the Mississippi. In former times the city was called Nizhny Novgorod. Since 1932 the Soviet authorities had renamed it Gorki after one of its most famous children, a former apprentice cobbler who became a friend of Lenin and one of the country's greatest writers. By authorising us to go there our guardian angels in Moscow had given us another terrific present: rare indeed were the foreigners granted permission to venture so far into the depths of the USSR.

With forty-four thousand workers Gorki's car and truck factory was the flagship of the Soviet car industry. From its

production lines came the famous greenish-coloured Molotova trucks seen everywhere on the roads loaded with men, livestock and goods, a sort of rustic and durable GMC that the USSR exported throughout the communist world including China. I could not help feeling a tug at my heartstrings as I entered the vast factory. The trucks passing before our eyes on line No. 1 were the very same ones that only two years previously, had secretly transported the guns that massacred the French defenders of Diên Biên Phu over the rutted tracks of the Vietnamese jungle.

Next to the truck area, another production line assembled the some one hundred and twenty Pobieda cars destined for the authorities and privileged of the regime. Slava was thrilled at the thought of discovering where and how his car had been manufactured. The young manager escorted us unhesitatingly through the clean, well lit working areas. He had agreed to give us a free choice of the fifth protagonist for our portrait gallery. We were immediately taken by a pleasant looking worker with a slightly round face. With his peaked cap perched on the back of his head, his blue overalls and mischievous look, he reminded us of a traditional Parisian street urchin. Specialist worker Ivan Gregorievich Sitnov, aged forty-seven, had the reference number T 40627. For eight hours a day he fitted engines relentlessly brought to him on an electric conveyor belt to

chassis! For ten years half of all the Pobiedas issuing from the Gorki factory had passed through his hands. Yet he knew he would never own one of the cars he lovingly assembled each day. At the official price and taking into account four years delay in delivery it would cost twenty thousand roubles, but he only earned seven hundred a month after deduction of the various taxes and contributions imposed at source on his wages. In Khrushchev's homeland there was no such thing as credit. According to Slava this was a capitalist artifice only justifiable in poor countries.

'In the USSR we have the means to pay cash,' he had informed us.

Cash or not, Ivan would have to sacrifice his entire salary for nearly three years to buy himself one of his precious little Pobiedas. Even supposing he could find the requisite funds, he could still not be sure of fulfilling his dream. In an attempt to curtail the Mafia trafficking to which the sale of new cars was subject in the USSR, the police actually required all purchasers to give proof of the origins of their money.

We had hit the jackpot: Ivan Gregorievich raised no objections to taking us home and giving us a glimpse of the realities of life as a Soviet factory worker. 1 Krasnodensev Street where he lived was a six storey high government

provided apartment block, built round a rather charming garden. His wife, Lubiana Ivanovna, a sprightly little woman with a gleaming row of gilded teeth, had just finished her day's work at the factory crèche. She earned three hundred roubles a month, just enough to buy a pair of shoes. The Sitnovs were definitely not the best endowed workers in the world proletariat but their purchasing power in Khruschchev's Russia was almost three times greater than before the war. Their standard of living would nonetheless astonish most communist workers in our Western countries. Their accommodation consisted of just one single living room of about eighteen square metres. A fold up bed put out at night was also used by their son Vachislav, aged twenty-two, a medical student at the Gorki faculty. Their kitchen was a cubby hole one metre by two without mains gas. They shared it, along with the toilet facilities, with another family. Lubiana admitted to us with unconcealed tears that this enforced cohabitation was the real bane of her existence. We were often on the receiving end of such admissions. In the 1950s the poverty and rarity of accommodation was definitely the Soviets' number one bugbear.

Every morning Ivan took the seven thirty bus to his factory. Before presenting himself at the various security posts he had time to admire the latest propaganda notices plastered on the establishment's exterior walls. That morning he was met by a huge Uncle Sam smoking a fat cigar marked 'atomic bomb', next to a pathetic-looking British soldier brandishing a bottle of gin and a wretched French tricoloured Marianne tearing her hair out. These three figures were shown in the middle of a desert bristling with derricks. A balloon had Uncle Sam saying: 'We'll sell our souls for petrol.'

Enormous wall paintings of workers brandishing the red flags of the revolution were next to greet Ivan on the way to his workstation. Everywhere placards in white letters on a red background, banners across the passageways, posters and honours boards reminded him that he was the most fortunate worker in the world and that his work well done was helping to build communism, the unwavering progress of which would soon liberate the working class in all those countries still under the capitalist yoke.

The Pobieda production line then started up to the din of electric spanners that would assail Ivan Gregorievich and his comrades' eardrums and muscles for the next eight hours.

At midday Ivan went to buy his lunch tickets from an old woman ensconced behind a counter. The canteen was a

sort of cafeteria where for the sum of just five or six roubles cabbage soup, a plate of goulash, two hundred grammes of bread and a glass of tea were given him through a hatch. Before starting work again he nearly always had time to go and play a game of draughts in the factory's recreation room, an immense hall with walls lined with portraits of Khrushchev, Bulganin and other members of the collegial leadership.

His shift finished at 5pm. Another shift then took up the relay because the factory ran for sixteen hours a day. Before returning home he invariably went to see what the young girl in the kiosk opposite the entrance to the factory was selling. When there was a queue it meant she was selling salted herrings. But more often than not all she had to offer was a few green and very wrinkled apples. Back home Ivan washed, shaved, changed his shirt and opened the *Pravda* the postman deposited in his letter box every morning.

Lubiana arrived a little later, after doing her shopping in the food stores on the workers' estate. She prepared the evening meal based on cabbage, potatoes and boiled meat on the paraffin stove in the communal kitchen together with the neighbouring woman. The Sitnovs would wait for their son to come back from the faculty before having dinner. Despite his worn shirt and threadbare overcoat, Vachislav

was a young man who looked as if he enjoyed life. Another three years of study and he would be a doctor, much to his parents' pride. For these humble workers it represented a huge social promotion and a feather in the cap of a regime whose most striking success was surely to form a whole younger generation of capable and politically convinced specialists and technicians in the same ideological mould. For Vachislav, a second generation Soviet, baptised but an atheist because the regime's schools had taught him that science had replaced God, a career as a medical practitioner lay directly ahead of him provided his passion for the practice of medicine never made him forget, as he proudly told us, that he was above all 'a political being' and his first duty was to exercise that role in Soviet society.

On Sundays Ivan, Lubiana and Vachislav got their best clothes out of the cupboard and went by tram to their cousins who lived, six to a room, in a basement in Gruzinski Street. On these occasions the family's elderly babushka would make the griddle cakes that Lubiana's mother once used to make in the family thatched cottage when they got back from Mass on Sundays. Now, with the occasional exception of Lubiana on important festivals, the Sitnovs never set foot in a church.

And so six months of the laborious, monotonous life of a Soviet worker family on the banks of the frozen Volga

would slip by. For Ivan Sitnov, 'the old partyless Bolshevik' as he called himself (only twelve per cent of factory workers were Party members), there were thirteen years to go before retirement when his pension would be three quarters of his wages. At the current rate, another one hundred and eighty thousand Pobiedas had yet to pass through his hands, unless in the interim the factory's young chief engineer finally put the famous Volga Automatic on the production lines, the vehicle the Russians maintained would compete with American cars on the world market.

We left Ivan, Lubiana and their son with a sadness we sensed was reciprocal by the warmth of their farewells. To celebrate our last moments together, like the Minsk railway worker and the Tiflis surgeon they covered the table in their little home with a generous array of drinks, cakes and sweetmeats. We were moved to tears. We exchanged addresses and left them the last of the newspapers, magazines and books in our possession. They would not, of course, be able to read them but we all felt that foreign writing might hold a certain magic in their hermetically sealed Soviet workers' world. For all their isolation and difficult living conditions, it would be dishonest to claim that these proletarians of the Khrushchev era seemed unhappy to us. No doubt the fall of the Stalinist idol had created a void in their existence, all the more sensible for the fact that those who had replaced

that idol had no regard for the mystery of God for which the Russian soul had always felt a need. Profoundly idealistic, sincerely convinced that they were contributing by their labours to the building of a better world, proud to serve a much-loved homeland, the Sitnovs, like virtually all the other Russians we met during that great journey, did not give us the impression of suffering as a result of being deprived of the freedoms we hold so dear.

11

THE HEROIC DEATH OF AN ARCHANGEL

We were back in Moscow, harassed but transfigured by the abundance of memories and adventures accumulated during our tour through the land of the Soviets. Our car was disgustingly dirty but resplendent with an extraordinary collection of messages of friendship traced in the dust that covered its bodywork. 'France and the USSR are the two greatest *tovarichi* on this earth', claimed one inscription. 'Long live Yves Montand and Edith Piaf', proclaimed another. 'The Kharkov workers greet those in France', 'Peace to the whole world'...We refrained from washing the car in order to take all these proclamations from the Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and the Caucasus home with us. We did not know, however, that by preserving the Marly's dirty state we were breaking a draconian Soviet regulation ordaining that on pain of a fine all drivers must keep their vehicles spotlessly clean. We could not go a hundred metres without some whistle ordering us

to stop or all the traffic lights suddenly turning red in front of us. Policemen would then come out of their boxes and run their fingers over the bodywork looking scandalised. It was difficult to keep telling them all in Russian the reason why we wanted to preserve the dust with its inscriptions, so I asked Slava to write a declaration on a piece of cardboard for the benefit of the Greater Moscow police, saying: 'We have not washed our car because we want to take back to France a little Russian soil and the innumerable expressions of friendship Soviet citizens have inscribed in it.'

One evening towards midnight two quite elegantly dressed young men came up and spoke to me in poor English. After greeting me politely, one of then took a wad of roubles out of his pocket and gave me to understand that he would like to buy my raincoat. The other pointed to my shoes. From toe to head I was instantly undressed in advance. To convince me of the legitimacy of their intentions they kept on waving their packet of roubles at me.

I politely declined their bundle, offered them a cigarette and continued on my way. Jean-Pierre and I were to be subjected to similar propositions on several occasions. It

seemed this was quite usual in Moscow. There was a whole section of Soviet youth that dreamt only of listening to jazz and dressing like New Yorkers. The Russians' surprising predilection for decorations and badges involved us conversely in some curious transactions. It was not unheard of to see several medals hanging on a suit lapel or dress. Some were very attractive. Organisations, associations, professional bodies also had their distinctive badges which we had decided on our arrival to collect and pin to the sun visors of the Marly.

Our technique never failed. It was enough for us to stop somewhere with the car. As soon as a crowd had encircled us, one of us would brandish a handful of little Eiffel Towers. People would scramble to offer us their badges and medals in exchange. Our collection ranged from a miniature gilded profile of Lenin to the multicoloured emblem of the Electromechanical Institute of Leningrad. Such was the success of our Eiffel Towers that a whole barter trade in them was set up in Moscow. Every day we would find a small boy in front of the Marly, pockets bulging with all kinds of badges he had come to exchange for one of the small magic broaches from our almost exhausted supply.

At last came the day of our grand return. Slava was thrilled: he had been given permission to accompany us back to France. This time his newspaper had entrusted him with a huge black Zim, on the sides of which he had had painted in French 'MOSCOW-PARIS – SOVIET JOURNALISTS'. Sadly, the charming Vera was not to be party to the journey. To prevent any impulse her husband might have to take advantage of this exit from the Soviet Union and 'choose freedom', the police authorities had decided to keep her hostage. Our colleague found it entirely natural that Vera's school should have 'absolute need of her presence to teach its pupils the piano'. A cameraman for Soviet television was to come instead of the young woman. We were sorry to leave our Russian friend behind the Iron Curtain.

One October morning, packed with tins of caviar, records, books and an entire collection of nesting dolls and miniature Kremlins given us in Gorki, Rostov, Minsk, Yalta and elsewhere, the Marly set off from Red Square under the astonished stares of hundreds of people queuing to go into Lenin's mausoleum. Direction: Smolensk, Brest-Litovsk, Warsaw, Berlin and Paris. Winter was already prowling over the immensity of Russia. Local people everywhere had donned the fleece-lined jackets and felt boots that formed the Russian uniform against the cold. In three or four weeks

the road would have disappeared beneath the white blanket of General Winter, conqueror of Napoleon and Hitler.

Slava erupted with a touching joy when we reached the French frontier. Unfortunately, however, our friend's first contact with French soil resulted in a small fiasco. Desperately wanting to fraternise with the policeman who checked his passport at the frontier post, Slava offered him a Russian cigarette, one of those papirossi with a long cardboard tip and very little tobacco. The Frenchman rolled the cigarette between his fingers, screwing up his nose with disdain. Then he declared:

'Here, pal, we call that a butt.'

Our return to the fold was greeted with cheering and applause from all the editorial staff of *Paris Match* who had run out into the Champs-Elysées. Numerous representatives of the national and international press, agency photographers and television and cinema news cameramen were also there. Slava and his colleague could not believe their eyes. The incident at the frontier was forgotten; they felt welcomed like a tsar and a grand duke. A team from *Match* was waiting to pilot them across France.

We said painful farewells to our car. I caressed its thick black bakelite steering wheel and gave the engine that had

given me so much pleasure and a few nightmares one last rev. I consoled myself with the thought that after this car there would definitely be others in my life: I had celebrated my twenty-fifth birthday between Karkhov and Kiev. But I would always remember with nostalgia the deep and generous resonance that only the marriage of eight cylinders can produce. The Simca representatives invited me to drive her on the last leg of her journey to their showroom window on the avenue des Champs Elysées, where she was to be exposed to curious Parisian gazes like one returning from another planet. Photographic displays illustrating her adventures in the course of our thirteen thousand kilometre trip had been prepared as a backdrop for the proud motorcar covered in the friendly graffiti traced in dust accumulated over the vast expanses of Russia.

Sadly, History was to deprive us of the pleasure of savouring our achievement. Fourteen days after our return, Hungarian patriots rose up in Budapest against the communist dictator crushing their country. They managed to take control of several of the capital's nerve centres. The insurrection took over several quarters of the city before spreading to other parts of Hungary. The communist world was on the point

of losing one of its bastions. Khrushchev decided to intervene. As a convoy of heavy tanks with red stars on them set out for Budapest, a white Alfa Romeo from Vienna charged through the Hungarian frontier and sped towards the burning capital. At the wheel, hair blowing in the breeze, buttoned up in his inevitable macintosh with his Leica round his neck, a tall guy sang at the top of his voice. Jean-Pierre Pedrazzini had responded unhesitatingly to the chief editor of *Paris Match*'s appeal. He had fastened his case, kissed his wife, made a brief stop at the office where I was classifying the photos from our Russian escapade to call out to me: 'See you soon, old man!' and rushed to Orly.

On 30 October he was in Budapest outside the communist party's GHQ in Republic Square. The insurgents were in the throes of launching an attack on the building. Tanks flying their flags appeared. The crowd applauded and sang the *Marseillaise*. Suddenly there was a howl of horror. The rebel flags were a ruse. The armoured vehicles were actually being driven by Soviet tank unit soldiers who fired on the crowd. Jean-Pierre was hit by three volleys of machine gun fire, in the legs, back and stomach. His fellow reporter, the Hungarian Paul Mathias, carried him in his arms to a Red Cross ambulance.

'Mind the cameras! Have you got the films?' worried Jean-Pierre through chattering teeth.

The ambulance arrived at the hospital to be met with a dreadful spectacle: hundreds of wounded and dying were packed into the corridors, courtyards and even the cellars. There was a lack of dressings, medicines, anaesthetics. In his atrocious suffering Jean-Pierre's courage earned everyone's admiration. He had only one concern: his photos. When a nurse came to give him a second injection of Achromycin, knowing this antibiotic was in extremely short supply, he refused it:

'Keep it! Others need it as much as I do.'

Hungarian surgeons tried to close up the wounds in his shredded stomach. They had no more catgut, dressings or antibiotics. Only immediate evacuation might just save our friend. As soon as they were informed the managerial and editorial staff of *Paris Match* mobilized to send an air ambulance to Budapest. A highly regarded surgeon from the Invalides Hospital, Doctor Dieckman, volunteered to go and fetch the wounded man. At the point of take off from Budapest a Russian tank positioned itself across the runway. I managed to get the French Ambassador to Moscow on the telephone, at whose home we had all had dinner less

than two weeks previously. I asked him to intervene with the highest Soviet authorities to have the runway cleared immediately. The Soviet Union's ambassador to Paris, the French presidential office, the Prime Minister's office and the Foreign Ministry were set in motion. In a matter of moments, a vibrant rescue chain was set up to save Jean-Pierre. At last the plane could take off. It was to be the last to leave the Hungarian capital surrounded by the bulk of the Soviet forces.

At three thirty in the morning on Friday 2 November, it landed at le Bourget. The entire team from the magazine was waiting with pounding hearts at the foot of the boarding steps. On the pillow of the stretcher I saw a haggard face, covered with stubble, ghastly pale, with eyes that had sunk into their sockets. A nurse was holding a flask with a drip over Jean-Pierre's dishevelled hair. He seemed to be unconscious. An ambulance took him to a clinic in Neuilly but the leading medical experts summoned to his bedside were unanimous; he was too weak to withstand surgery. We must wait until his body had recovered some of its strength. A cruel irony had it that his room, no. 35, was the one in which Marshal Lattre de Tassigny had died four years earlier. A poignant photograph of the chief of the French First Army in full uniform on his death bed had been one of the first scoops Jean-Pierre had landed for *Paris Match*.

While my friend lay dying, Paris came out in sympathy with the Hungarian insurrectionists. The salesmen at the Simca showroom on the Champs Elysées scrambled to hide the Marly under a cover and took down all the photos of our Russian expedition for fear of cobblestones smashing their window. I hurried to the hotel where we had arranged for Slava to stay, to make sure he was not in danger. I found the poor man on his knees on the pavement in the process of frantically scrubbing the words 'MOSCOW-PARIS-SOVIET JOURNALISTS' off the wings of his Zim. He looked terrified.

'Dominique, they're going to set fire to our car and maybe kill us too!' he moaned while from the nearby Champs-Elysées came clamourous shouts of 'Down with the USSR! Death to communists!'

I told him about the tragedy that had struck Jean-Pierre. He seemed so overcome I was afraid he might break down.

'Soviet bullets!' I said. 'How ironic after the three months of friendship we've shared.'

With those words, the lenses of his heavy glasses misted over with tears. He took hold of both my hands and squeezed them as hard as he could.

'Poor Jean-Pierre,' he murmured. 'Poor Jean-Pierre...'

'Dominique, I'd like to see my photos!'

In between bouts of delirium the request kept on coming up. After tearing out the picture of him on his stretcher emerging from the plane, really looking like a living corpse, I took him the edition of *Paris Match* containing his report. It was the last thing to give him pleasure. His condition deteriorated rapidly. His urea count rose to 1.40 grammes, a sign that his whole system was in the process of poisoning itself. All the same he found the strength to implore his nurse to call Balzac 00 24, the telephone number of *Match*.

'Tell them to come and get me,' he begged.

I tried to reassure him. He was dreadful to look at with his half-closed eyes with only the whites still visible. His cheeks and forehead had turned a waxen colour. He was alert to noises. At the slightest step in the room, his eyes would open slightly, his pupils move in all directions, bright with agony. Catching sight of his sister Marie-Charlotte, who watched over him with me day and night, he wanted to sit up. She was the person to whom he was undoubtedly closest.

'Charlie, get me out of here!' he cried out to her.

Then, suddenly, it was me he was gripping by the

shoulder and pulling towards him with extraordinary strength.

'Come on, Dominique, let's go!' he moaned. 'Let's go!

Around midnight a nurse gave him an injection of morphine, but his delirium continued. He was given a massive dose of Pentothal. At three in the morning it became difficult to find a pulse. An hour later his breathing became more and more laboured and irregular. The nurse put an oxygen mask over his face. At four forty he stopped breathing altogether. His sister planted a lingering kiss on his forehead and closed his eyes.

I looked at my dead friend and realised that I had said goodbye to my youth.

Seven years after the events recorded here, I was at home in Paris when I received a telephone call from Marseille. The voice at the end of the line had such a distinctive accent that I thought I recognised the Armenian we had met in Soukhoumi. It was not him but his brother calling from the rue des Cordonniers[1].

'Monsieur Lapierre, I need you help. A miracle has just

happened: my brother Georges has obtained a visa to leave the USSR but now the French authorities are refusing to give him a visa to enter France! Be so kind as to do something! You remember? My brother had the courage to kiss the French flag on your car in front of everyone. You published the picture in *Paris Match*. The Soviets didn't like it very much. They condemned him to eight years' imprisonment beyond the polar circle.' The man had difficulty containing his emotion. 'And now the French don't want anything to do with him.'

I immediately asked for a meeting with a friend of my chief editor who was well up in the DST, the police department for national security. I took him the photo of Georges Manoukian kissing our French pennant, and pleaded his cause. The policeman remained implacable.

'My dear Dominique Lapierre, you may well be an excellent journalist but you are above all very naïve,' he responded in the end. 'You can be sure that if the Russians have released "your" Manoukian it is because they have done a deal with him: "your" Manoukian is now a KGB spy.'

I was astounded by this assertion. Those cops must have a vivid imagination. The memory of the poor guy describing his escape attempt with his cats and his three year nightmare in a gulag emptying the cesspits came to mind.

'The man may be a spy now,' I told him, 'but I will guarantee you that after a fortnight with his family and friends in the rue des Cordonniers in Marseille, the KGB will have to wipe him off their slates. He's taken too much to serve his torturers' regime for any length of time.'

Shaking his head sceptically, the policeman assured me he would look into the case.

One evening three months later I found a magnificent spray of roses outside the door to my Paris apartment. On the card were just four words: 'Thank you. Georges Manoukian'.

Thirty years went by. One day in 1993 I felt the need to know what had become of the Armenian from Soukhoumi. My wife consulted the viewdata service. She found three Georges Manoukians living in Marseille. I dialled the first number. No reply. I called the second. Someone picked up.

'I'd like to speak to Georges Manou ... '

I didn't even have time to finish saying 'Manoukian' before a voice erupted into the receiver:

'I'll bet that's Monsieur Dominique Lapierre of *Paris Match*!'

A few days later I went, bearing a bottle of Champagne, to greet the gulag escapee in the charming apartment at 10, impasse du Gaz, to which he had retired. We drank to our poignant encounter in the Soviet Union. He no longer had his gilded metal teeth but he was still much as he had been when he pushed his way through the crowd to kiss our little flag. On his return to France he had found a job with a Parisian shoe-maker. But it was Marseille that was in his blood. He had gone back to the city he had dreamed about so much in his Siberian camp and there opened a shoe repair shop.

A letter from his wife received at the beginning of 1996 informed me that Georges Manoukian had died of a heart attack whilst shopping. 'Seeing you again was the last great joy of his life,' the poor woman concluded.

A few days after our arrival in Paris, the companion of our journey, Slava Petoukhov, returned hurriedly to the USSR. The bloody suppression of the Hungarian revolution by his country's tanks and the death of Jean-Pierre had put a premature end to his dream of getting to know France, the language of which he spoke so lovingly. When, in the

following February, *Paris Match* published in three instalments the grand report of our journey through Russia illustrated with Jean-Pierre's amazing photographs, Slava was immediately taken to task by the management of his newspaper and the police authorities who had charged him with keeping an eye on us during our journey. How had he been so imprudent as to let us take so many liberties? He tried to redeem himself by writing, on the front page of *Kamsomolskaïa Pravda*, a vitriolic article denouncing the way in which I had reported on our adventures and our meetings with the Russian people. The article was illustrated with the photo he had taken of me climbing over the gate to the Livadia Palace in Yalta. This lampoon against his 'French friends' was nevertheless not enough for him to escape merciless punishment. He was sacked and exiled to Siberia for three years.

Six years later, in November 1962, whilst reporting on the twentieth anniversary of the battle of Stalingrad, I met Slava again in Moscow. We hugged each other with a joy that showed that we had both buried our grievances over our articles about our fantastic journey in the summer of 1956. Slava had found another job as a journalist for Novosti press agency. He had left Vera to marry a young journalist who had given him a daughter, Elena. To this day Elena still

remembers the toy bear I brought her from Paris, a bear that talked and danced, something unheard of in the Soviet toy world at that time. Shortly after our reunion *Pravda*, the Soviet Union's leading daily, asked Slava to become its correspondent in Romania where he had already spent time before our journey and where he had perfected the beautiful French he spoke. It was there, in the homeland of a dictator given to every excess, Nicolae Ceauscescu, that he witnessed the progressive collapse of the communist system which, he had assured me at the wheel of his Pobieda driving through the Ukraine and the Crimea, would last a thousand years and succeed in catching up with America in less than twenty-five. Poor Slava! Like so many other sincere ideologists, he would never recover from seeing his certainties swept away so swiftly by the wind of History.

In 1990, when the new Russia was dismantling its kolkhozes to give the land back to peasants like those we had met in the Ukraine, a serious fall during a visit to his mother's grave was to put an end to his active life. Despite several operations he remained paralysed. In telephone conversations we went on evoking the happy days of our youth when together we discovered the forbidden world of the Soviet Union, the superiority of which he had struggled to extol with so much faith and passion.

On 21 January 1995, after one last operation, he went to join Jean-Pierre. He was sixty-seven years old. And so I found myself the only one left to set to music the thirteen thousand kilometres of happiness and friendship that this book records.

[1] *Cobblers*
[2] *Street*

'All that is not given is lost'

HUMANITARIAN WORK CARRIED OUT AND FINANCED BY DOMINIQUE AND DOMINIQUE LAPIERRE

IN INDIA (CALCUTTA, THE GANGES DELTA, MADRAS AND BHOPAL) AND ALSO IN AFRICA AND SOUTH AMERICA

Thanks to Dominique Lapierre's royalties and fees as a writer, journalist and lecturer, and thanks to the generosity of readers and friends belonging to the 'Action Aid for the children of lepers in Calcutta' organization founded in 1982, it has been possible to initiate or maintain the following humanitarian work:

1. The assumption of complete and continuing financial responsibility for three hundred children who have suffered as a consequence of leprosy in the *Udayan*-

Resurrection home; with the help of the *Friends of Udayan* in the UK the construction of a new building (sick bay, study room and office) and the purchase of a plot of agricultural land to make the home more self-sufficient.

2. The assumption of total and continuing responsibility for 125 handicapped young people with physical and mental disabilities in the HSP NGO homes in Howrah and Jalpaiguri.

3. The construction and equipment of the Backwabari home for very severely mentally and physically disabled children.

4. The extension and reorganization of the Ekprantanagar home in a very poor suburb of Calcutta, providing shelter for 140 children of seasonal workers at the brick kilns. The provision of drinking water on tap has transformed the living conditions in this home.

5. The provision of a school near the home to educate not only the 140 children who board but also 350 very poor children from the nearby slums.

6. The reconstruction of 100 huts for families who, in November 1988, lost everything in the cyclone that hit the Ganges Delta.

7. The assumption of total responsibility for the SHIS NGO's clinic in Banghar and its programme to eradicate tuberculosis, which extends to some eight million inhabitants. The installation of fixed X-ray equipment in the main dispensary and the creation of several mobile units providing diagnostic X rays, vaccinations, medical treatment and nutritional care.

8. The establishment of numerous units in the isolated villages of rural Bengal, providing not only medical treatment and a programme to combat tuberculosis but also programmes for prevention, diagnosis, education, vaccination and family planning, as well as 'eye camps' to restore sight to patients with cataracts.

9. The sinking of tube wells for drinking water and the construction of latrines in numerous villages in the Ganges Delta.

10. The launching and maintenance of four dispensary boats in the Ganges Delta to take medical aid to people on fifty-four isolated Sunderban islands.

11. The assumption of responsibility for the rural treatment centre in Belari which serves more than 1000,000 patients a year from hamlets devoid of any medical care; the construction and assumption of responsibility for the ABC centre for physically and mentally disabled

children; the construction of a village for 100 abandoned mothers and children.

12. The creation of and assumption of total responsibility for, several schools and medical (allopathic and homeopathic) centres in two particularly poverty-stricken slums on the outskirts of Calcutta.

13. The construction of a 'City of Joy' village to rehabilitate homeless aboriginal families.

14. The provision of ten solar-powered water pumps for ten very poor villages in the states of Bihar, Haryana, Rajasthan and Orissa to enable the inhabitants to grow their own food even in the dry season.

15. The assumption of responsibility for a workshop to rehabilitate lepers in Orissa.

16. The dispatching of medicines and the provision of 70,000 high-protein meals for the children of lepers at the Udayan home.

17. Various undertakings for underprivileged adults and victims of leprosy in the state of Mysore, abandoned children in Bombay and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), as well as the occupants of a village in Guinea (Africa), and abandoned and seriously ill children in a hospital in Lublin (Poland).

18. The creation of a gynecology clinic to treat women without funds who were victims of the Bhopal chemical disaster. The purchase of a colposcope to detect cancers in the cervix. The arrangement and financing of several missions to train the Indian teams by volunteer gynaecologists from Switzerland and France.

19. The dispatching of emergency teams and aid to victims of the terrible floods in Bengal in the Autumn of 2000; a rehabilitation programme to re-house thousands of families who lost everything.

20. The assumption of on-going responsibility since 1998 of part of Fr Pierre Ceyrac's education programme for several thousand children in the Madras region.

21. The dispatching of aid the day after the tsunami of December 2004 to enable the SHIS and ABC centres to provide concrete help on the spot in Tamil Nadu and on the Andaman Islands on both an immediate and long term basis.

22. The construction of a new ABC centre in Kathila to take in, educate and rehabilitate three hundred physically and mentally disabled children; with the creation of an orthopaedic equipment workshop.

23. The creation of a home to house and care for abandoned

girls and sick women under the management of the ABC organization.

24. The provision of expenses for the three monthly assignment of a volunteer to follow up on the administration and accounts of the Espoir Deux home created by Loti Latrous in the Ivory Coast to house and care for women and children with AIDS.

25. The assumption of financial responsibility for the 'City of Joy' Home in Guatemala City, which takes in girls off the street (prostitution and drugs).

26. The purchase of a vehicle to facilitate the work of Fr Santiago in Equatorial Guinea and the purchase of materials for the villagers to build a school themselves so that their children could have a primary education without having to walk five kilometres twice a day.

HOW YOU CAN HELP US TO CONTINUE OUR WORK OF SOLIDARITY AMONG SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST UNDERPRIVILEGED MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Because of lack of resources, the 'Action Aid for the children of lepers in Calcutta' association founded in 1982, can no longer meet all the urgent needs which the fourteen non-governmental non denominational organizations we have been supporting for twenty-five years, primarily in India but also in Africa and Latin America, have to provide for.

In order to continue financing the numerous homes, schools, dispensaries and development programmes (adult education and training, microbanking) run by admirable women and men who have devoted their lives to serving the poorest of the poor, we need to find fresh support.

We have, furthermore, an ongoing serious worry. What would happen if tomorrow we were to have an accident or if

illness were to prevent us from meeting the budgets for the centres that depend on us?

There is only one way to ensure that this work of solidarity continues and that is to raise enough capital to generate the 1.8 million US dollars needed annually to finance the various projects.

How can we raise that capital if not through the help of a multitude of individual supporters?

For some people it is relatively easy to give ten thousand dollars to a good cause. Some could probably even give more.

But for the vast majority of friends who have already spontaneously given us a donation after reading *The City of Joy*, *Beyond Love*, *A Thousand Suns* or *It was five past Midnight in Bhopal*, or seen an article or heard a talk and who often faithfully keep up their generous support, it is much too large a sum.

Ten thousand dollars, however, is also twice five thousand dollars or four times two hundred and fifty, or five times two hundred, ten times a hundred or even a hundred times a hundred dollars,

Such a sum can be raised from several people at one person's initiative. By photocopying this message, by

spreading the word, by joining with other family members, friends or colleagues, by setting up a chain of compassion and sharing, any one can help to keep this work alive and bring a little justice and love to the poorest of the poor.

Alone we can do nothing but together all things are possible.

The smallest gifts count for just as much as the largest. Isn't the ocean made up of drops of water?

A big thank you from the bottom of my heart for everyone's support, whatever their means.

P.S. We would like to remind readers that the 'Action Aid for the Children of Lepers in Calcutta, has no administrative costs. All the money received is sent to the centres for which it is donated.

HOW YOU CAN HELP DOMINIQUE & DOMINIQUE LAPIERRE TO CONTINUE THE WORK AMONG SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST UNDERPRIVILEGED MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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By saving a child, by giving him or her the opportunity to learn to read and write, by providing him or her with an apprenticeship for a trade, we are saving tomorrow's world.

Depending on his state of health or disability, to house a child, care for him, feed, clothe, educate and give him vocational training costs between 45 and 50 euros a month; say between 525 and 600 euros a year.

To sink a drinking water well in the Ganges Delta costs between 63 and 755 dollars.

To treat ten patients suffering from tuberculosis costs 250 dollars.

Every donation counts: the most modest as well as the most sizeable. We are grateful to everyone for contributing according to their means

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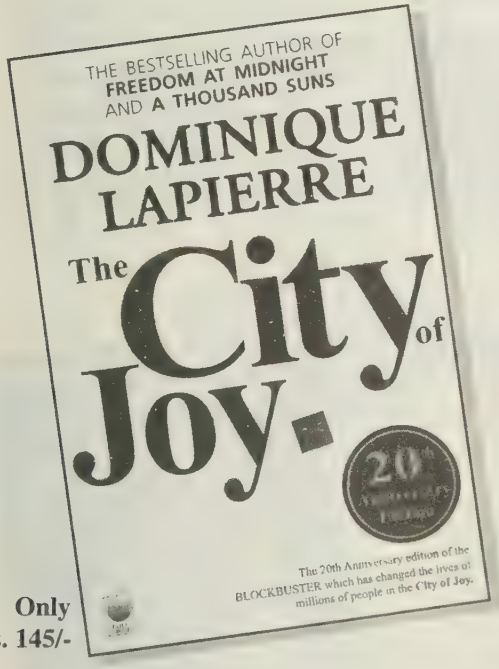

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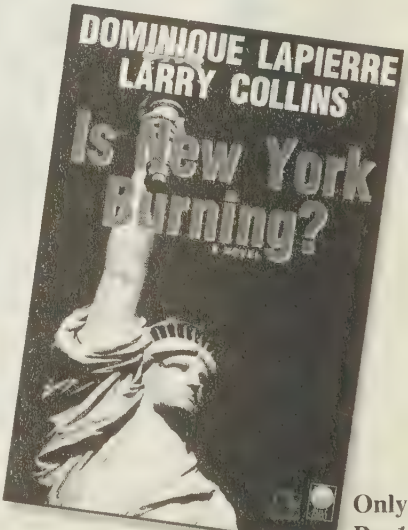

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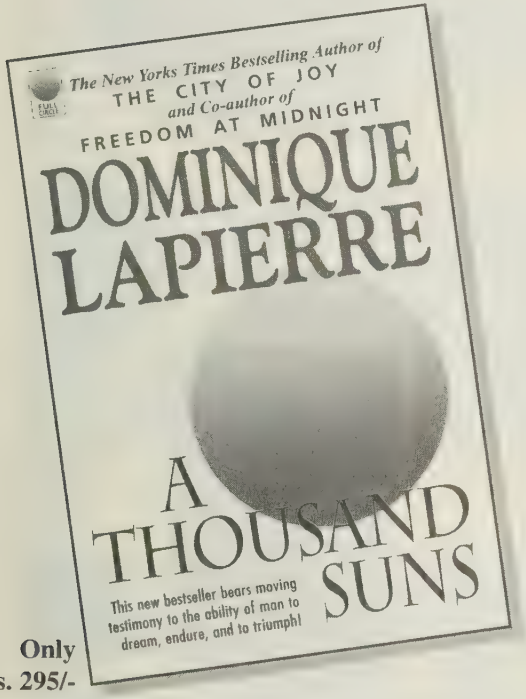

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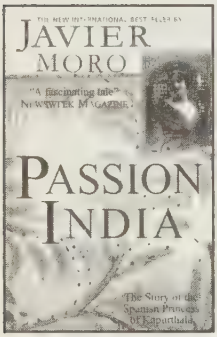

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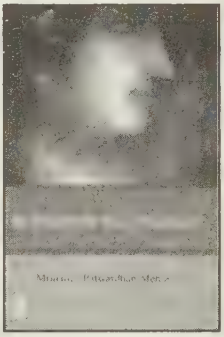

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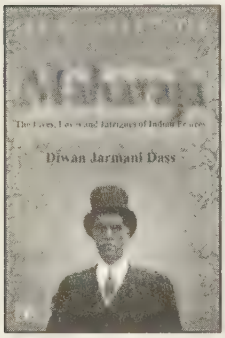

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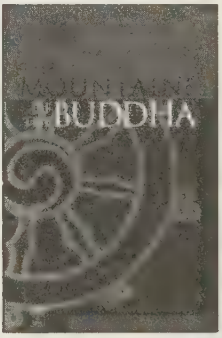

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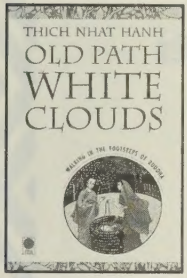

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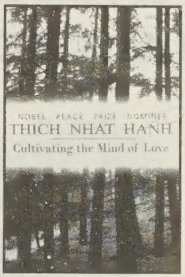

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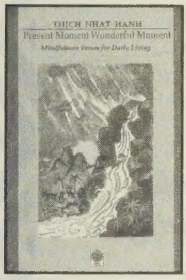

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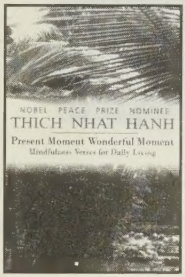

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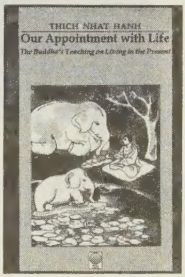

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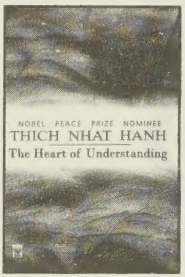

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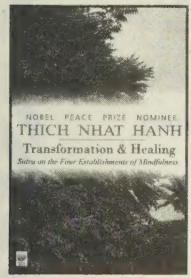

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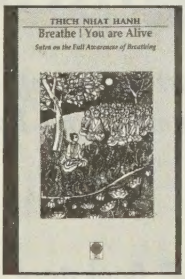

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Dominique Lapierre is the co-author with Larry Collins of "Is Paris Burning?", "...Or I'll Dress You in Mourning", "O Jerusalem", "Freedom at Midnight", "The Fifth Horseman", "Is New York Burning?".

He has also written "The City of Joy", "Beyond Love", "A Thousand Suns" and, with Javier Moro, "It Was Five Past Midnight in Bhopal". His best-sellers have sold in millions all over the world. Several have been made into major films.

Since his meeting with Mother Teresa in 1981, Dominique Lapierre is ... supporting a major net of humanitarian actions mainly in India but also in A... and in South America. In recognition of his generous solidarity, he has b... made "Citizen of Honour" of Calcutta and named "Benefactor of ... Sunderbans".

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